

Typhoid and Swans

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Typhoid and Swans

by [NoFootprintsInSand](#)

Summary

The first time Clarice sees the stag, she is walking in the woods surrounding Will Graham's old Wolf Trap home.

With her mentor and friend Jack Crawford dead, and her once-promising career in shambles, Clarice Starling decides to find out what really happened to Dr. Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham.

prelude to capture

Incredible art for this fic made by the amazing [Tempely](#).

You can find a very evocative playlist for this fic [here](#), with all my thanks to ValentinSylve.



The first time Clarice sees the stag, she is walking in the woods surrounding Will Graham's old Wolf Trap home.

She arrives too late in the day; it's almost dusk. She parks her car way down the drive, out of sight of the house, and walks the last few hundred yards.

She does not go inside the house itself. It is long since repossessed and sold. She briefly stands before it and takes it in. The chipped wood, the homeliness, the faded comfort so at odds with whom Graham turned out to be. She looks at the old porch and imagines him sitting out there with his pack of dogs. She takes in the barn and wonders if he butchered and arranged Randall Tier in there.

Then she turns her back on it and heads for the river. Walks along it for a spell. It's frozen over, fervent motion turned to ice, but she conjures Will up here, in summer. Standing thigh deep in the stream with his lures, being happy, *quiet*; somewhere else. She sees him pulling out fish after trashing fish, gleaming in the sunlight with their struggles.

She doesn't know Will Graham, but she can imagine him fishing.

Clear as day.

She moves towards the treeline. They are dark, the woods, but they are calling out to her all the same. So she heeds, wanders beneath laden pines, and her breath is frost and her vision is white. All is silent and she feels weightless, otherworldly, she fancies she leaves no footprints in the virgin snow.

She is here just trying to get a sense, perhaps just a faint whisper on the wind, of the troubled man who once lived here. But all she gets is eerie stillness, and that stillness is moving her deeper into the woods. Away from the house. Darkness is falling, slowly at first, a sinuous beast made of shadows, stretching and yawning and rubbing about her ankles.

She knows about winter dusks though. Soon it will pounce, and all will be dark.

But that is not important right now. There is a beating susurrus, the shadows curl and spiral, but she is not afraid.

She moves deeper. And she loses track a little bit. Perhaps she is walking in circles, perhaps it doesn't matter.

And then suddenly, caught right between two seconds, she sees a dark stag looking at her from beneath an enormous tree. Maple, she thinks absently. Ancient. The stag does not seem afraid of her, it meets her gaze steadily. It stands so very still; a statue carved out of petrified lava. But she can see its glistening flanks moving, can see its breath billowing on the frosty air, can see planets and stars orbiting its antlers.

They stand in the quiet looking at each other, and she's about to lose her grip on time. Then the creature slowly backs away into the shadows, and she lets out a breath she hadn't realised she'd held.

Only later, on her drive back to Quantico, does she really reflect on the *feathers*.

But by then she is sure she is wrong, saw wrong.

There is nothing left.

She's got *nothing left*.

Her career is over thanks to the Evelda Drumgo fiasco. That botched arrest, bullets flying all around a screaming baby. Scapegoated, pushed out, ostracised, thrown under the bus; whatever you want to call it, and her loathing for Paul Krendler burns white hot and eager.

Jack Crawford - mentor, father figure, rock - rots in a too-early grave. His heart, and she blames Dr. Hannibal Lecter just as much as she blames Bella's death. More. She blames Lecter *more*. She doesn't have all the details, was never privy to all the intricacies of Jack Crawford's machinations, but she is convinced whatever transpired with Lecter, Will Graham and Francis Dolarhyde, killed Jack just as surely as his broken heart.

She had asked to interview Dr. Lecter once, back when she was a trainee and he was incarcerated under Dr. Alana Bloom's care in the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Back when Jack had her working the Buffalo Bill case. She had asked because she knew Lecter would be able to provide invaluable insights. He'd done it before, after all, albeit out of captivity.

And she had asked because of her need to be better, always better, than from whence she came. Better than her past, better than her blood. The belief that only when she's become the very *best* ...that's when the pleas of victims everywhere will quiet down, silence. Die.

Jack had refused her request, something like real horror in his eyes, and in the end she had caught Jame Gumb anyway. Afterwards she had heard the talk about Miriam Lass, and better understood why he had said no.

But she regrets his decision now, just as she did then. Because had she stood before Hannibal Lecter, *seen* him, exchanged words with him...then she might have a piece of him now, the way he himself collected pieces of people. She might clutch a shard of his mind in her fist, jagged and vicious, her palm bleeding red but it would be worth it to hold him. She might have known him just a little bit, have more than the fractured mosaic she's gained by illicitly going through transcripts and boxes of evidence and video interrogations and newspaper clippings.

As for Will Graham...he had quit as a lecturer before her arrival at the academy, and by the time the Tooth Fairy happened she was working different cases. Jack never brought her in. She had caught some glimpses of Graham at Quantico though, when Jack brought him out of retirement and on to the case and back into Lecter's clutches.

But she hadn't truly paid much attention until Lecter and Graham disappeared into thin air.

Now she's reading his papers. She devours his case notes. She's watching video recordings of his lectures over and over and over. She can't stop *looking* at him.

A slight, twitchy man, handsome but hiding. Eyes always faraway and inward at the same time, and mind a knife stabbing straight through every single crime scene.

She's jealous of his otherworldly ability, his empathy. She thinks of the people she could save if she had it, she could silence so many *pleas*.

And no one knows where he is. No one knows if he's alive. If Lecter is alive.

Well. She's got will. She's got a small cache of savings, stubbornly squirreled away since forever. She suspects that with the way things are going she will soon have nothing but time. She will find them, or find out what happened to them. She will. She *will*.

For Jack.

Alana Bloom refuses to have anything to do with her, but Clarice manages to catch her unaware and scrounges a short phone call. The line sounds tinny, crackles, as if Alana is far away. In a different country. Clarice rather supposes she is.

Alana's voice is cold, flat.

"Listen. Sure, the first protégée of Crawford's that went after Lecter did come back, but minus one arm and her entire mind. The next *joined* him. Think carefully, Agent Starling."

She pounces at that, near delirious at this whiff of something *tangible*.

"So you think they might be alive? Both of them? Lecter and Graham? The theory around here is that Lecter killed Graham, then escaped for good."

Alana is quiet for such a long while Clarice thinks she might have hung up. Then her voice comes back, and it is not dull anymore. It is full of hurt and betrayal and broken bones.

"I'm not sure someone like Hannibal can die." Her voice cracks, becomes more splintered still. "And if it is possible for him to keep Will alive, then he will. He....cherishes Will. In his own way. And Will can't be happy without Hannibal. If there is a way for them to be together, then trust me, Agent Starling, they are."

Then her voice goes emotionless again. Void.

"I strongly advise you not to go near this. Remember Beverly Katz."

Then she hangs up.

Frederick Chilton next, and he is much keener to see her, to talk.

A pity only that he is without his lips.

His lack of lips does not stop him from trying to communicate, and she doesn't understand how he is still alive. He will never again leave the hospital. He clings to his life support, reclines as if on needles in his hyperbaric chamber, graft after graft after graft, and yet he *burns* to tell her things. And after some time with him she learns to better understand his lipless words, even as fervent and pained and cut off at each end as they are. Because he wants someone to listen. He wants someone to know. How he came to be ruined. How Will Graham and Jack Crawford set him up, tossed him into the fires of the Great Dragon. How Hannibal was always a monster, and Will Graham became one too.

She leaves knowing that Chilton is another one thinking that Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter disappeared together.

It's when she steps outside the hospital she sees the stag again. It's standing across the road, between two parked cars, and its gaze is solemn and inscrutable. The feathers on its legs and hind and neck are clearly visible now, in daylight; a shimmering black with darkest purples and greens and blues, like rainbows in oil, where the dull afternoon sun hits the plumage.

The light hits something else too – she strains her eyes and sees. Dark scales, like fish scales, scattered on the creature's flank. Ricocheting and bending light with each breath the beast takes. That is what had made it glisten when she first saw it in the woods.

She can't breathe.

It looks at her, and there is archaic history in its eyes, ancient tales and life and *murder*.

Then it turns and walks away among the cars.

A hallucination, she realises. Not here. It had not been real in the woods in Wolf Trap either.

She is so familiar with all the different case notes by now, with the photographs and the transcripts, that it doesn't take her long to piece a broken, incomplete picture together. Garrett Jacob Hobb's hunting room. Cassie Boyle impaled on the head of a stag. Hannibal Lecter's office.

Stags and antlers everywhere, and no wonder that her busy, tired mind might conjure one up. But she doesn't understand the feathers or the scales. She doesn't understand why she is seeing things that aren't there. She feels in freefall, violent and unchecked, snagging on antler tines on her way down.

What is the significance?

She drives home, and she doesn't tell Ardelia anything. She doesn't tell her anything at all.

She can find no trace of Dr. Bedelia du Maurier. None whatsoever.

She shivers, but she keeps going, because she has chosen her path.

She finds Hannibal's beach house almost by accident.

She had of course figured that he had more properties than just his Chandler Square residence. They had all figured that. He hadn't kept Miriam Lass in a hole all that time, he hadn't kept Abigail Hobbs permanently in the basement. The FBI had searched fruitlessly, and Hannibal had given them nothing at all during his trial or his stay at the state hospital.

Miriam Lass refuses to see her, talk to her, and Clarice doesn't persevere. She might be single minded in her quest, hardened, but she can recognise that the other woman has been hurt beyond endurance and then further still. If she doesn't want to talk then Clarice won't insist on ripping open her wounds. Likely she can't remember anyway, don't have anything left now but the false memories Hannibal gave her.

She refuses to think about how she could end up like Miriam if she continues.

Perhaps lose a lot more than Miriam did.

Abigail Hobbs won't talk to anyone ever again, and Clarice studies her photos with sadness. Surrounded by predators all her life, chewed up and spat out, large blue eyes brimming over with secrets taken to the grave.

She will get nothing from Miriam and Abigail.

But then, while going through the same boxes of evidence and old possessions as everyone else, she comes across a crumpled old receipt recovered from Hannibal's house. From six years ago, petrol from a gas station in a little town in Delaware. At the time it had probably seemed an inconsequential piece of information, particularly with Hannibal having turned himself in.

But now...

She remembers how five years later the last confirmed sighting of Francis Dolarhyde had been in Delaware, after that botched transfer that saw several FBI agents dead and Lecter, Graham and Dolarhyde vanished into thin air.

She brings up a map, pores over it, goes entirely on feeling. She doesn't turn around, but she knows the stag is standing in one of the corners of the evidence room. She can hear it breathe, she can smell the musk and the forest and the darkness on its pelt as she glides over towns and villages and nature reserves. Vaguely she wonders if the beast will warn her if someone's coming. Her already precarious position with the FBI will be further jeopardized if someone catches her with evidence she's got no business handling.

Then she forgets all that when she hits upon a name on the map that speaks to her.

Slaughter Beach.

The next day she drives out there because she doesn't think Hannibal could possibly resist.

It takes her the best part of three days of driving up and down the coast, venturing onto private driveways, trespassing, looking, searching searching *searching* before she finally comes upon the house. Secluded and tucked away and perched precariously right at the edge of the cliffs, about to crumble on down into the Atlantic.

She sees the police car half tucked away on the drive. The front door is unlocked. She walks through the house, runs her hand along the partly covered furniture, so expensive, so lush, so dusty and abandoned. She takes in the shattered wine bottle in the living room, the wine long since dried into the expensive rug.

Then she steps through the broken patio doors out onto the terrace, and she finds the Dragon.

Salty winds and sunshine and rain have permanently altered the once fearsome, insane being. But she stands before him with something akin to esteem. She studies the shape of his wings made of blood, forever etched into the flagstone by weather and time. She travels across the parts of him turned to bone, bleached white by the Atlantic sun. She considers what she can see of his wounds.

At least now she knows what happened to Francis Dolarhyde.

And it looks as though he gave Hannibal Lecter a run for his money.

She stands on the very edge of the bluff looking down and out at the water, letting the wind blow her hair and her thoughts and her doubts every which way. She considers the crashing waves and the stag, the stag stands alongside her but about ten yards down, and it is looking at the waves too.

Francis Dolarhyde's remains are sprawled behind her and there's the faint smell of something she can't name.

But perhaps that is just the mysteries tangled up in the pelt of the stag.

She walks back into the house and takes one last look around, looking for the detail that had scratched at her mind during her first walk through but eluded her. She stands stock still, and in her peripheral the stag out on the cliffs, as still as her and as focused, dark and forbidding and holding so many answers without telling her.

Then it hits her.

Two wine glasses.

Two.

She calls in the find, then she books herself a trip. She knows that her unauthorised digging in the Lecter mess will be the last straw, the ultimate excuse, and she accepts it. And so the

expected suspension becomes a reality and it's a large piece of her identity attached to the badge that is no longer hers, so *large*. The largest part of her. She would be lost without this new purpose she's given herself, it gives her the strength to ignore the gloating on Krendler's face.

And one day, one day she will *get* him.

She flies to Italy for no other reason than that Hannibal had once fled here followed by Will and she wants to walk the streets they both walked, together and apart.

And anyway, she hasn't had a vacation for years.

Her budget is meagre, so she boards in a small village outside Florence, hires a beat up Skoda and drives into town every day. She walks slowly around the city, jostled by tourists and propelled forward by an inane conviction that she will know what she is looking for when she sees it. She tries to catch feelings and thoughts and clues out of thin air, and now the stag is there, always there. Behind her, before her, alongside her. Disappearing into crowds, reappearing again.

Always in the corner of her eye, and she's stopped being scared of it and she can't remember when.

She haunts the Palazzo Capponi, asks questions no one wants to answer, stirs memories no one wants to remember. Considers the courtyard, where Hannibal gave a policeman the death of Judas.

She wanders around the Uffizi, sits in front of *La Primavera* for hours and hours.

And she carries a letter to Ardelia in her pocket. One that explains everything. She hasn't posted it yet, because that would make this...real. Right now she's on vacation. Once that letter is posted it will be an acknowledgment that she has truly *departed*. That she's on a hunt. That she might have found a lead, a trace, a scent. That she might be in danger.

That she might not come back.

She drives through the night all the way down to Palermo. To the Norman Palace. To the Capella Palatina.

She arrives with morning light awash on the ancient stones, with the intensity of smell and impressions that might not be her own, rather of those that have gone before her here. She breathes in Byzantium, she breathes in saints, she tries to burrow through the cracks in the mosaics for answers. How long last the memories of stones?

It might be foolish, but how could she not go to the place where Hannibal Lecter once left Will Graham a Valentine? She'd seen the crime scene photos before she got suspended. Hannibal's origami heart was something horrifically beautiful to behold.

The stag stands atop the memento mori on the floor, looking at her, waiting, and for the very first time she considers touching it.

But she daren't.

The call comes through on her long drive back up to Florence. Unknown number. She grapples with the cell phone, the steering wheel, with exhaustion, but manages to answer.

“Starling.”

“Clarice Starling?”

That voice. A man's voice, kicking at her brain, lodging deep inside. She wedges the phone more securely between her shoulder and ear, eases up on the gas.

“Who is this?”

“Listen to me. Stay away. You get any closer, I'm not sure I can convince him to leave you alone. I'm not sure I'd *want* to.”

Of course she recognises his voice. How can she not, after listening to it for hours? Recordings of his lectures, his interrogations, his *trial*.

“Will? Will Graham? Where are you? Tell me! I promise I just want to talk.”

His answer is immediate and his voice is hard.

“Forget it. End this now. I'm warning you only out of consideration for Jack.”

Olive groves are flying by, streaks of greens and blues and her heart tapping out a rhythm she's never felt before. She thinks that might be blood in her mouth.

“Jack is dead.”

A silence that crackles, a voice gone soft. More like the voice she can remember from all the tapes. A little forlorn.

She likes his voice like that.

“I know.”

Then a long silence, and she's terrified she might lose him, that he'll hang up and this will be the closest she can ever get.

“Just one thing. Please? Will? Are you there?”

His voice comes back, and so hard again, like the stones in the Norman Palace, like the blade of Hannibal's linoleum knife.

"What is it?"

She breathes, considers, but she must ask. There was never a choice.

"What does it mean?"

"What does what mean?"

"The stag. The black one. I see it everywhere. It follows me."

Stuttering breaths, a sound as if he's clutching the phone.

"Oh Jesus," he says, then he hangs up.

When she comes back to her boarding house a wreath of flowers is waiting for her by the door to her room. She picks it up as she unlocks the door, steps inside with an armful of blooms.

She gingerly sets it down on the rickety old bedside table, considers it. It's an artful yet wild arrangement, muted colours against dark greens. Belladonna and hemlock. Henbane and moonflower. Monkshood.

It's very beautiful.

"Hello, Dr. Lecter," she whispers into the poison, and she thinks she will have to post the letter to Ardelia now.

capture

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter 2: capture

Clarice stays in Italy until her money runs out, and until her final hearing is due. She doesn't hear from Will Graham again, and most certainly not from Hannibal Lecter. She unearths no new clues, no new knowledge, and she regrets posting the letter to Ardelia. Now she's having to ignore her calls, responding to increasingly frantic voice messages from her friend with three word text messages.

I'm fine, Ardelia.

Don't worry, ok?

I'm back soon.

Stop calling, please.

Clarice doesn't recognise herself. She becomes someone else with the scent of prey in her nose, even if that scent is as weak as that of the flowers from Hannibal, drying on the wall above her narrow *locanda* bed.

She learns to love Italy though.

Her ears, always sensitive to nuances, sink into the language almost without her noticing. She learns to pick out words from the rapid-fire vowels and consonants flying in the air around her. The noises become music, delicately tuned, full of life.

She finds little places in Florence away from all the tourists, so prevalent even in off-season. She walks down narrow little alleyways, hand dragging along walls whose stones have trapped whispers of history within them, an ancient acoustic; faraway vibrations she fancies she can feel in her fingertips. She finds tiny little trattorias using sun-warmed tomatoes and vibrant sweet basil and pungent, salty parmesan and nothing else in their pasta dishes.

She returns to the Palazzo Vecchio and to Forti de Belvedere, no longer to badger the dusty old *Studiolo*s for information and clues about Hannibal's tenure there, but rather to take it all in. She slips into something not quite like a dreamworld, surrounded by Dante and poetry and its words: fire and innocence and experience. All this old history and knowledge and art, tangling in her hair, sticking to her lips and eyelashes and skin, a beating, faraway susurrus in her ear.

She takes the Škoda and drives along the fallow olive groves and hills and vineyards of Tuscany, all the windows down, wind sweeping her hair every which way. Her cell is always within easy reach on the passenger seat, but Will Graham doesn't call again.

Yes, she can see why Hannibal loves Italy enough that he would return again and again.

And the stag is with her, she senses it always at her back. She can see its scales gleaming and its feathers moving in the corner of her eye. It's starting to become...comforting to have the creature near. She certainly smiles a little when she sees it in between the luggage conveyor belts at the airport.

She's happy it's travelling back to the States with her, that it's not staying behind in Italy.

"*Addio, Firenze,*" she murmurs against the airplane window when high up in the air, and she watches how condensation turns her words into something else; archaic patterns and hieroglyphs she can't decipher.

She makes a decision on the plane back across the Atlantic, one she isn't proud of. She makes it nonetheless, because knowing what she knows now it would be impossible for her to stop. The only question is if she'll keep going with the resources of the FBI and the Justice Department behind her, or entirely on her own.

She cements her decision in the car on her way to the hearing. She puts her phone down after her brief conversation with Krendler and knows that there will be no turning back now, no matter the outcome. Then she speeds up. Best to get it over and done with quickly, before the bad taste on her tongue penetrates too deep, travels down her windpipe and unfurls in her lungs.

She hears hooves on the carpet behind her as she walks down the halls of the Department of Justice towards Krendler's office. She thinks she can feel warm breath against the back of her hand, smell musk and decaying leaves, hear rushing water. See antlers reflected in office windows along the way.

She doesn't turn around.

She suspects Krendler agrees to see her before the hearing only because it gives him ample chance to gloat over her in private, to really dig his knife between her ribs before twisting it in public.

She's right.

"Starling," he greets without looking up as she enters his office, long neck bent over some papers on his desk that Clarice is sure aren't important. He's belittling her, and he's

attempting to take away from her that which she spent years working for, fighting towards.

Agent.

“What did you want? I don’t have long, so out with it.”

She hates him, she realises. It’s disgust and abhorrence that she is feeling right now, not just dislike. Actual hate, clean and sharp and intricately drawn in its ferocity.

This petty little man has spent her entire career trying to trip her up, undo her, and for what? She doesn’t think that she has ever hated anyone else in her life, not even her father’s killer, but she hates Paul Krendler. He is trying to take away the very filaments of her, her cornerstones, her identity. Her career in law enforcement. Her law sanctioned ability to *help* people.

She is surprised at how even her voice is when she answers him, standing straight in front of his desk, digging her nails into the palm of her hand.

“The Hannibal Lecter case. I want you to assign it to me.”

That gets his attention, and he throws down his pen, leans back in his five thousand dollar chair with his arms thrown behind his neck, and Clarice is having to fight not to bare her teeth at him.

“And why would I do that? We don’t even know if Lecter is alive. And if he is, the trail is freezing cold. No sightings since that botched transfer of Crawford’s. And you aren’t exactly flavour of the month, Starling. You’re about to be axed. You know it, I know it, everybody else know it.”

He smirks at her, and his lips are wet and his teeth shine dully. He looks precisely like the scavenger he is.

She draws a breath, wills herself not to lash out.

“I found Hannibal Lecter’s other house. Where he killed Francis Dolarhyde. Where he kept Miriam Lass and Abigail Hobbs. DNA from both women was recovered there, wasn’t it, Mr Krendler?”

Krendler’s eyes gleam. Ugly eyes, small and dark and hungry.

Her skin crawls.

“That’s correct, Starling. But so what? You found a cold trail. It’s been some years since whatever happened in that house. And you had no jurisdiction to dig. You handled evidence you’d not been authorised to handle. You think you can come here and make demands?” He scoffs. “You won’t even be able to ask for a cup of shitty coffee down in the canteen by the time I’m done with you.”

She throws one of her cards on the table, hard, hoping that the paper cut from it might be enough to tear his jugular.

“Will Graham called me when I was in Italy. Hannibal Lecter sent me flowers.” A deep breath. “They’re both alive.”

Krendler leans forward over his desk now, suddenly and she can see decisions whipping each other all over his face. Damning her and be done with it. Hearing her out and perhaps *reap*.

“And you didn’t report it?”

“I am reporting it now, Mr Krendler. I am willing to debrief, to turn over my phone, though I doubt you’ll get anything. I’d need it back though, in case Graham calls again.”

Greed for power seems to win out, at least for now.

“What *exactly* is it you want, Starling?”

She thought he’d never ask.

“I want to find Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham. I want you to provide me with the resources to do so. I want complete access to all evidence, all case files. No obstructions. I want to work on my own.”

Another card thrown on the table, only it’s not really a card, it’s a lure. She thinks Will Graham would understand.

“And when I find them, you’ll get all the credit. You. Your department. I don’t care. Take it all. That’s it, Mr Krendler. I do the work. You get the glory.”

And you do so love glory, don’t you, you piece of shit?

He’s leaning even further over the desk now, nostrils flared, scented to tender vulnerabilities, her soft underbelly.

“Let’s say you’re right. Let’s say they are both alive. Let’s say they did contact you and you’re not just making things up. Just how do you propose to do this? Better agents than you have tried and failed, Starling. *Much* better.”

She digs her nails further into the palm of her hands, wills her heart to slow down and her revulsion to be less noticeable. She’s not sure she’s successful.

“Perhaps. But Lecter and Graham are aware of me now. They have both reached out, each in their own way, and may do so again if I make enough noise. In the meantime I think we should explore the luxury goods angle.”

She draws a breath, tries to make her voice calm and emotionless. She can’t give away to Krendler how important this is to her. He would tear it from her in a heartbeat, just because. Spite and vindictiveness in his veins, not plasma and blood cells.

“Hannibal Lecter likes fine things. Expensive things. *Rare* things. Things one might only acquire in a few select places around the world. And I don’t think he’ll be able to stop liking these things, or acquiring them, ever. I think he can be found that way.”

Krendler scoffs, looks smug, leans back on the chair again. She's losing him. She can't lose him. She's so close.

"That's hardly original, Starling. That's how Mason Verger tracked Lecter down in Florence."

She starts, tries to not let it show. She hadn't known that. She didn't know how *anyone* did, what with Lecter killing Verger not long after arriving at Muskrat Farm. Something itches at her brain, but she loses her grip on it when she instead wonders how that reprehensible sadist had landed on the idea in the first place. Then she remembers that Dr. Alana Bloom had briefly been in his employ.

Ah.

She thinks she might need to talk to Dr. Bloom again. *And* Margot Verger.

She focuses back on Krendler.

"With all due respect, sir, I think I can get further than Mason Verger did."

He pretends to look thoughtful, considering, but she can tell he's made up his mind. At least for now.

He smiles at her, and it's so *ugly*.

"Very well. Very well *for now*. Don't for a second presume to think you can relax. You find them, Starling. You find them, and then maybe we can talk about your future here."

This time she can't hold it back; she bares her teeth at him on her way out.

They go through the motions of her hearing, and she doesn't get dismissed, and everyone is surprised except her and Krendler. It pains her to think that they are, however reluctantly, in league with each other.

For now.

She goes home, and she wants to sleep off the jet lag, and she gets shouted at by a worried-sick Ardelia. She allows it all to run off her, and she tries to recalibrate, breathe, fill out the seams of herself, confidently inhabit the space of her own body. But her skin has shrunk, grown too small.

She's starting to fear it can no longer contain her.

Before bed she stands looking out of the window at the dark stag where it melds with the shadows in her yard. She wonders if its antlers could contain her, hold her aloft, high enough that she may see, everything she needs to see.

Everything there is.

Then she goes to bed, but she doesn't really sleep.

She gets to work, and nothing happens.

Nothing at all, and late winter gives way to early spring. No hits on truffles, or ludicrously expensive bottles of wine, or obscure, exclusive lotions and scents. She walks tiny little circles in the tiny little basement room that Krendler assigned her as a half-hearted insult, and she gets nowhere.

She had been reasonably sure of her strategy. Now she realises that, really, she's got nothing, nothing at all apart from the knowledge that they are both alive. She doesn't even know where in the world they are. She knows only that they are somewhere together.

She's got that, and she's got the drive to find them both. When she sits in that dingy room late at night, washed out under artificial lights and avoiding going home to Ardelia, then she gets a little closer to examining her purpose for going after Lecter and Graham. When she's hyped on caffeine and junk food and running entirely on fumes, then she can acknowledge that getting some justice for Jack Crawford isn't the only reason she is doing this. There are other motives too, but they are half formed and vague in her subconscious, ink blots floating on water and she is waiting to see what shapes they take. What she can see in them.

What they will reveal.

And she catches herself longing back to Italy. All the time. She wonders if she'll ever get to see Tuscany in summer, she wonders if Lecter and Graham are there, sauntering down the cobbled roads wearing crisp linen suits and wide brimmed hats. Admiring the architecture and drinking espressos in cafés in day, tucking into fillets and ribs and still beating hearts at night.

She must find them.

She ponders the possibility of doing something loud. Vulgar. Like taking a leaf out of Will Graham's own playbook, and have Freddie Lounds publish a garish spread on Tattle Crime. Lurid headlines and colour photos, fishing for a reaction or a misstep. But she dismisses it. At least for now. From everything she has gathered about Hannibal Lecter he dislikes vulgarity, brashness, tastelessness. *Rudeness*. She wants to catch him, yes, but she doesn't necessarily want to get on his bad side at this stage in the game.

And he doesn't strike her as the kind of man that would ever set a foot wrong.

Unless of course it is on purpose.

So she mothballs that idea and contacts yet another tailor on Savile Row, talks to silk merchants and purveyors of rare art.

No purchases are made that can be connected to Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham.

“Get him back on the Most Wanted list,” she tells Krendler at one of their irregular meetings. They exist only so Krendler can berate her for lack of progress and unsubtly threaten to end her career, and Clarice hates them. “Put Graham on it too.”

Krendler sneers and pushes papers around, a sure sign that she is about to be dismissed. “As far as we know, Will Graham hasn’t done anything to warrant entry on the list, Starling. He’s disappeared, presumed dead. That doesn’t make him a fugitive.”

She persists.

“Add him to Hannibal’s entry. Put as many high definition photos on it as you can, be as descriptive as possible about Lecter and his crimes, then add on “presumed to be in the company of Will Graham”. Shake things up a little. Give some interviews. Talk about new leads. Hell, throw a press conference.”

She gets his attention then. Krendler does so love a good, dramatic press conference. Spotlight. Cameras. Her lip curls, and Krender sees it.

“How can I talk about new leads when you have precisely none, Starling?”

She doesn’t even try to hide the contempt in the look she gives him. She’s found out more than any of the rest of them, except perhaps Will Graham. And Graham...well.

“Not entirely true, Mr Krendler. We know that they are alive, and we know that they are together. I leave it up to you to spin exactly how it is that we know this.”

So Krendler throws his press conference, bathing in the lights and the questions. Clarice stands out to the very far right of the podium, and she says nothing, and she doesn’t break eye contact with the cameras once.

Not once.

And then Clarice gets a call.

It’s from Chambers Street wine merchant in New York, and they’ve sold a bottle of one of the wines she has an alert out for. A Roumier 2002 Chambolle Musigny 1er Cru Amoureuses, bottles of which Hannibal Lecter had been known to serve, to personally uncork and pour, for his guests at his most exclusive dinners.

She asks for the security footage, and pours over it as soon as it’s emailed across. Impossible to see the face of the purchaser. A large, bulky coat and a hat denies both the camera and her

a good look of body build and facial features. Body language gives nothing away.

She calls the shop, speaks to the attendant. For such an expensive bottle of wine he remembers very little, is unsure of eye colour, stature, dialect, weight.

She sighs and gets in her car. It'll be nothing, there is no way Lecter and Graham will be so close by. It'll will be a trail leading nowhere, but she needs to do something with herself. She's a creature of decisive action, a being of fight or flight, and she's been cooped up the the cage of a basement room for too long, held in stasis and frustration. A fruitless drive to New York will still be a change of scenery, will give the illusion of action and air.

Once there she interviews the store attendant face to face, but he remembers nothing new. A man had come in to purchase the bottle of wine. It had been retrieved for him from the high value section kept locked up out back, he had paid for it, and left.

What did this man look like?

Not too tall, quite slim. Maybe brown eyes? Maybe green?

Clarice shifts on her feet, impatient and something like an itch in her limbs, an inability to stand still coursing through her, frustration and everything always that little bit out of reach.

Hair colour? Beard? No beard?

The attendant shrugs and Clarice resists the urge to slap the man for being so unobservant, uncaring.

Over the shoulder of the clerk she sees the stag walking down a narrow aisle towards her, flanked by expensive vintages. It moves with a different purpose, she notes, fast and sure, head raised high and the eye contact with her absolute. Unflinching.

On her way back out to the car she brings up the surveillance video on her phone, studies it again. Nothing jumps out at her, but she feels the stag's muzzle on the back of her neck. Soothing her. Riling her. Moving her hair, brushing her ear.

Sending electricity coursing down her cells, her blood stream, igniting her, oh, what is this clinging to her atoms?

She turns to face the stag. She meets its eyes, so close, so close she can feel its breath across her cheeks and forehead and they take a step towards each other at the same time, step *into* each other. She can smell it, and see the feathers and the scales so near, and all the yellow cabs and noise and people die away as she stands there on the pavement, so small and the stag so large. She raises her hand to *finally* touch it, run her hand along its tines, and it slowly lowers its head to let her.

And so she doesn't hear the approach. She doesn't see or sense anything. She feels only a sharp sting in her neck, like a spider bite, like a kiss with fangs.

Then everything goes black.

Chapter End Notes

I'm Swedish, and it goes without saying that my knowledge of the procedures of the FBI and Department of Justice are pretty much non-existent/gleaned from tv and movies. I could research it all properly, but then I'd inevitably get distracted, tumble down about 15 rabbits holes and never actually write anything at all. So...if you come across anything jarring, just suspend your disbelief, pretty please with a cherry on top? We're about to leave the FBI and law enforcement and the real world behind anyway.

the darkness of dusk

Chapter 3: the darkness of dusk

Her hearing returns to her first. It reaches her far ahead of smell or sight or speech or the ability to move.

At first she thinks that she is dead. That perhaps this is truly what the afterlife is like; buried alive in darkness, deprived of all senses, all movement - but not thoughts.

And oh her *thoughts*. Vicious, snarled things, animals caught in steel-jawed traps, chewing off their own legs to escape; unbearable, impossible to look at. Full of lament and claustrophobia. And right now it's all she's got.

That leads her to wonder if this is the Hell she has never believed in. If she's to be held in this dark, empty limbo for all time, *aware*, but unable to do anything about it; feel or touch or talk. Locked in, but fully cognisant.

Suddenly, absurdly, she recalls sitting in the evidence rooms at Quantico, going through the boxes of Hannibal Lecter's notes and drawings recovered from Florence. At first she can't understand why, but then she sees, like high contrast Polaroids in front of her, his work on Dante. The Divine Comedy. Heaven and Hell.

Ah.

She tries to remember all of Dante's circles, tries to identify which one she might be trapped in, but the knowledge glides away from her, elusive and taunting and turning to smoke between her fingers. No matter, she thinks, it doesn't matter now.

Then, with the suddenness and violence of a gunshot, her hearing comes back, and she recoils inside herself. It's a gift with strings, with *barbs*.

She can hear her own breaths, but she doesn't know if it means that she is in fact alive. Perhaps here, in this underworld, one is fooled into thinking that bodily functions still exist, that blood rushes with heartbeats and oxygen and the surety of life.

It takes her a little while to realise that it is two sets of breaths she can hear. Her own, *near*, inside her. Deep and worryingly far between. And someone else's. Close by, but *outside*; not in her head.

In the absence of anything else tangible, Clarice clings to this breathing done by someone else. She can't move, can't see or feel or smell, but these breaths prove that there exists something outside of her. That she might still be alive, that she isn't forever trapped in a claustrophobic hinterland between the living and the dead. She uses the sound of someone's

lungs inhaling and exhaling air as a rope, slippery and frayed and treacherous, that she can use to pull herself towards cognisance and sanity.

It takes a long time. She would scream, but she hasn't the ability to vocalise. She can only howl inside her own head as she clammers and pulls and reaches reaches *reaches* towards this proof of a life outside of her own, towards what she is convinced is another living person. Fear and impotence hunts her, snaps at her heels, and she can't run, not even inside her own head.

Then she feels something brushing her nape, just once, and she senses the presence of something large behind her in the dark.

The stag. It walks up alongside her and she strains towards it to put a hand on its flank but she can't quite get there, the beast is just at the end of her fingertips. But it's enough to know that it's here with her, near.

And so she makes steadfast progress, stubborn, bullheaded. She brings her identity about herself like a blanket, a protective cloak. She's an agent of the FBI. She knows she is inherently capable, she knows she is brave. She tracked down Jame Gumb single handedly, she had fought him in his pitch black basement of horror and she won. The darkness around her now is as impenetrable as Gumb's basement had been, but she can defeat this too, she knows she can.

She follows the breaths as if they are breadcrumbs, follows the winding path not further into the forest, but back to herself. She wonders how long time she has spent trapped in this peculiar, surreal purgatory, fighting to break through. Is it minutes or hours or days?

It feels like years.

The stag is walking just ahead of her now, she can almost see it, dark in darkness. Solemn and steady and perhaps malevolent, perhaps not, but she follows it just as much as the breaths.

Then, suddenly...she feels how the beast disappears and she can open her eyes.

Vision isn't immediate, and then it's just a kaleidoscope of shadows and light, like sun dapples in wild motion, whirling out of control. But the movements gentle after a while. They gentle, and form into a ceiling. Ornate, and high above her where she lies, with roses and intricate woodwork in a warm nuance. Cherry, she thinks inconsequently. Cherry wood.

Then she tries to move. She can't turn her entire body, at least not yet, but she can turn her head to the side, just a little, in the direction of the breaths that had led her back to herself. She lands on a face, pale, with eyes that catches light in different ways.

Will Graham.

Looking relaxed but alert, reclining in an oxblood Chesterfield, his hair swept back and to the side, his beard trimmed neat, his eyes calmly meeting hers. There is a hint of softness to his

mouth, to the pronounced but delicate curve of his upper lip, in contrast to a darkness in his eyes that owes nothing to the colour of his irises.

He looks kind, but he looks dangerous too.

There is a scar on the side of his face, ugly and jagged and shiny, that had not been present in any of the photos she's seen of Graham.

The first words out of her mouth are husky and unplanned, not at all what she had meant to say.

"You're not wearing your glasses."

There is the slightest curl of a smile on his lips as he leans forward a little bit in the chair.

"I don't actually need them. Never did. My vision is fine."

His voice is as she remembers it from the lecture videos, interrogation tapes, the phone call, but somewhat smoother. More even; stronger.

"You wore them to protect yourself from people."

He nods.

"That's right."

"You're not wearing them here, with me."

He smiles, a real smile, she thinks, with the corner of his eyes crinkling and a quick flash of teeth and it warms up his entire face, he looks *boyish* and she knows she mustn't trust it.

"That's because I don't need to protect myself from you, Agent Starling. Not really."

Neither of them mention the word *captive*, because it is written starkly on the air between them and there is no need. Will Graham has very much changed, realises Clarice, and she wishes he would give her even the slightest hint, some kind of reassurance, that her life isn't in immediate danger. And more of her wakes from forced slumber, starts functioning, looking for ways to survive.

"Call me Clarice," she says.

"Did you dream?" he answers. "Just now. Did you dream?"

"No," she says, but then thinks that perhaps it *was* a dream, this notion that her body was her coffin and she trapped inside it. Perhaps it was a dream and not reality.

"What did you give me?" she asks, voice a little stronger as more and more returns to her. Little sharp pieces of memory, falling from her hands and forming into an incomplete jigsaw by her feet, as vivid and as impenetrable as an oil spill. Standing on that busy New York

street, surrounded by cars and cold spring rain and rushing people, reaching up, about to touch the stag for the very first time.

The sting in her neck, sharp and quick.

Will leans back in his chair again, never lets go of her with his eyes.

“It was quite the cocktail, I’m afraid, though I am unsure of the specifics of it. Ketamine. Opiates, too.”

And *that*, she thinks, explains rather a lot.

She shakes more confusion and delirium out of her hair, and takes in more of her surroundings than just Will Graham’s face. He stays quiet, head at a slight tilt, a finger on his upper lip.

And she, she continues to return to herself. It’s a relief to feel her identity trickle back inside her in fits and starts. The horrors of her nightmares or hallucinations slowly recede, a low, disconcerting hum in the background but no longer ruling her. She starts observing, cataloguing.

Surviving.

Will Graham seems content to let herself take her time, sits easily and studies her as she takes stock.

The room she is in is quite small but unmistakably opulent. Much of the walls are covered with heavy drapes, but what she can see of them is as beautifully carved and ornate as the ceiling. The drapes, of a deep green velvet, go from floor to ceiling, and she is fairly certain there are no windows behind them. As for other potential routes of escape, there are two doors. One, she suspects, leads to a bathroom. The other must therefore lead out of the room. It looks heavy and thick, she notes despondently. Oak, and with a locking contraption contrasting harshly against the older, fluid lines of the rest of the interior. It looks modern and terribly efficient. And it clearly locks on the outside.

Shit, she thinks.

With quite some effort she moves herself into a sitting position against the pillows. Will doesn’t offer to help her, no doubt realising that she would hardly welcome his touch. She looks down on herself, and realises with some relief that she is still wearing the same clothes as she did when she interviewed the sales attendant in the wine store.

She’s on a queen sized bed and the sheets are of silk. Apart from the bed and the Chesterfield in which Will Graham reclines there is a small desk of a fine wood she can’t name, and a cupboard that can only be referred to as a fucking *armoire*, not a wardrobe or closet or anything as middling. Heavy and beautifully decorated with hand painted flowers, it stands on curved legs, and she knows with quite some certainty that there will be no magical land of escape at the back of it.

More importantly, at first glance she sees absolutely nothing that might be used as a weapon or a tool with which to escape. Not that she is surprised.

She turns back to Will.

“I’m not in New York anymore, am I?”

Will Graham smiles again. She wonders if he is trying to soothe her, calm her.

It’s not working.

“No. No you are not. New York was yesterday. Today is...today.”

He doesn’t elaborate, and she doesn’t expect him to. She is surprised he even gave her as much as a sense of time, that he didn’t allow her to drift quite as unmoored as he no doubt could.

She gives him another appraisal. He is a slight man, not very tall, and she is in good shape. She wonders if she could overpower him.

“I wouldn’t,” he says softly, but his eyes flash with that darkness again, something she can’t name. “I really wouldn’t try.”

She sits further up against the headboard and wraps her arms about herself, even though the cold she feels is hardly external but rather one seeping from deep within her bones.

Not force, she thinks, no, not force. Her mind will have to be her only weapon then, at least for now.

But her mind is so very tired and confused.

“Tell me about the stag,” Will says.

She considers, and she remembers his reaction when she mentioned the beast over the phone. Shock. *Recognition*. She decides that she’s got nothing to lose by telling him.

“I see it everywhere. It follows me. Came to Italy with me. Just before you...you *caught* me I was about to touch it for the first time.” She breaks off, realises now when she’s talking more how hard it is to make the words obey her. How tricky it is to bring her memories to heel. She wonders how long it will take until the drugs leave her system. She can’t stand feeling this vague. This helpless.

“What does this creature look like?” asks Will, but she gets the sense that he isn’t really wondering, that he...that he already knows. That it isn’t a question as much as a need for...for *confirmation*.

She shivers, and realises that no amount of disassociate drugs can blur the picture of the stag in her mind’s eye, that it exists with the sharpest lines and most vivid colours in her memory and probably always will.

“Large. Dark. Almost black. Feathers along its neck, it’s legs and hind. And scales. It’s...”
She hesitates, then carries on. “It’s beautiful.”

“Scales?” Will asks, something sharpening in his seated stance, something making his gaze keen and razor edged.

“Yes,” she answers, and she can feel how she is slumping a little as if in response to the tightening of Will. How she tires already even though there are so many questions yet to ask, so much to find out, so many obstacles to overcome. She shakes her head, tries to clear it.
“Yes,” she says again. “Scales all along its sides. Like fish scales, you know? Black. They...they shimmer and glisten when it moves. Catches the light.”

Will looks like he understands, and like he won’t tell her what it is he knows. She holds onto his voice, how it still sounds kind even though his eyes are hard like flint.

“I see.”

She wonders exactly what it is he realises, and why she feels so shut out from it.

“You’ve seen it too, haven’t you?”

She hates how weak her own voice is becoming, how her eyelids droop and her chin falls towards her chest. But she refuses to slip away, keeps her eyes trained on Will, because this is important, she knows it is.

Will says nothing though, just meets her eyes squarely and maybe he hides things that way, maybe he tucks things away in plain sight, maybe he’s learnt *how*.

She knows he knows. Knows what the creature means, what it portends.

She only wishes that *she* did.

Will Graham had never mentioned a stag. Not in any interrogations or debriefs or casual conversations that she had been able to find records of. She knows because she checked, thoroughly, after she herself started to see the creature. But it’s a hallucination. He might have mentioned recurring hallucinations to his psychiatrist.

Of course, Dr. Hannibal Lecter burned all his notes before he fled to Florence.

“We share this,” she murmurs, her voice beginning to sound wispy, beginning to weaken. She suspects she won’t be able to keep herself awake for much longer. “Isn’t that peculiar, Mr Graham? I’ve never experienced hallucinations or visions before. Now I see what you saw. I know I do.”

Will doesn’t acknowledge her assertion, her *conviction*. Instead he nods towards the bedside table standing between them, and slides forward in the armchair, prepares to leave.

“There’s water. I doubt you’re hungry just yet, but you’ll get something to eat later. For now I think you should sleep a bit more.”

She eyes the crystal glass dripping with condensation and resolves to get her drinking water straight from the bathroom tap. She needs to get the drugs out of her system, not take in more. Then she realises that Will has stood up, that he is halfway across the floor on his way towards the door. She realises that she doesn't want Will Graham to leave, that she'd rather be with the the unknown quantity of him than sit here alone and locked in.

"You know, I envy your empathy. The way you rescued people. Saved people. I want that for myself. I want to be able to do that."

If Will reacts to her use of past tense she doesn't notice it. But he does look pained when he meets her eyes over his shoulder, just a flickering second of rawness, of something that she thinks might be really *him*.

"The cost is undescrivable," he answers, voice all sharp edges and hurt. "To always *see*."

The way he puts emphasis on the last word smatters goosebumps across her arms, and she wonders about all the things she doesn't know about Will Graham.

"You're with him, aren't you? You're with Hannibal Lecter."

Will turns around then, walks back to the Chesterfield and sits down again. She keeps talking, even though it's a struggle, because she can't stand the thought of being left on her own.

"I thought I could find him the same way Mason Verger did."

She's slurring now, and she realises that she's sliding back down onto the bed, that she'll have maybe a minute or two before she's unconscious again.

Will smiles a little, but it doesn't reach his eyes.

"You made one miscalculation, Clarice. Back then, Hannibal *wanted* to be found. Now, he does not. *We* do not."

He leans back a little in the chair, steeples his fingers under his chin, and Clarice thinks that for all his new stillness and surety, he does that to keep his fingers still and busy. To keep from *twitching*.

"But you started digging, and we didn't want that. I remembered things about you. Jack spoke highly of you. You caught the Buffalo Bill killer back when you were still a trainee. I thought that you might actually succeed in finding us. So did Hannibal. And we didn't manage to warn you off. So we decided to nip this in the bud before you could cause us true damage."

She brings her knees up against her chest even as she recognises this as defensive, scared gesture. She can't stop herself.

"Why didn't you just kill me?"

He smiles then, and it is the first things that he's done that truly chills Clarice. It's a wide smile, all teeth, but it absolutely does not reach his eyes.

“I didn’t want to. I’m... *curious*.”

His gaze is so incredibly steady, no looking away, no breaking eye contact, and it’s the last thing she sees before she is finally forced to close her own. His voice follows her deep into sleep.

“And so is Hannibal.”

five past midnight

Chapter 4: five past midnight

When Clarice wakes again she's alone.

She climbs out of bed as soon as she opens her eyes, even though her head is spinning wildly, her thoughts at an odd tilt, askew and difficult to grasp. Her mouth is dry and her limbs won't quite work as they should, jerking and shaking at odd times.

But she gets out of bed because she doesn't know how long she'll be left alone. How much time she has.

The crystal glass of water that had stood on the bedside table is gone now, so she heads for the bathroom first. Fine marble and gilded taps, a deep roll top bath on lion feet, but no mirrors, no shower screen; no glass that she can break and use as a weapon.

No lock on the door.

She quickly uses the toilet, then drinks deep and long from the tap, the thirst a living, curling pain in her throat and chest. She splashes cool water over her face, then lets it run over her wrists whilst leaning heavily against the sink. Clearer, her mind is *clearer*, but still not where it ought to be. She abhors this handicap, this feeling of helplessness, the fury at having her greatest weapon running at reduced capacity.

She investigates the bedroom.

She pulls all the drapes first. Luxurious and soft under her fingers, a liquidity to the material she's never felt before. But, as she had thought, they reveal only wall beneath. No windows, and she is too distracted to appreciate the fine and intricate woodwork exposed.

The bed she is familiar with, frame heavy and baroque, the bedside table simple and without drawers. No convenient, solid lamp perched on top with which she might bludgeon her captors and escape. Instead there is a copper light fixture carefully screwed into the wall just above the headboard of the bed.

There's the chesterfield, and the sleek wooden desk with empty drawers and another light screwed into the wall above it. The beautiful armoire, empty but for a few simple items. Couple of pairs of lounge pants, some tops. All, as far as she can tell, of silk and cashmere. No hangers.

She doesn't get changed, even though her clothes reek of fear and confusion. She could do with a bath too, her hair lank and her skin covered in a layer of cold sweat.

But no way, she thinks. No way.

She studies the door out of the room. Oaken, and unmistakably solid and thick. Locks on the outside, as she had thought, just a smooth, impenetrable expanse of wood where the handle should be.

There is nothing else in here, certainly nothing she could use. It has been carefully gone over to ensure no escape, no impromptu fashioning of weapons.

It's almost like they, or at least Hannibal, have done this before, she thinks with the bleakest of gallows humour.

She tries to take stock of her situation, but it's still tricky, her thoughts gliding through her fingers like so much gossamer. All she can think is that she got too close. They had both tried to warn her away, then she had stood with her chin raised at Paul Krendler's press conference, eye contact with the cameras absolute and unflinching, and she had willed them to act.

And act they had.

Get too close to the devil and you will get burned, she thinks with something skirting the edges of hysteria.

And she wonders where, exactly, Will Graham belongs in this pantheon of Hannibal's.

Then she returns to the bathroom and sits on the floor with her back against the closed door. A flimsy, threadbare illusion of privacy and safety, perhaps, but one she will take.

That's where Will finds her.

"Clarice?"

She jerks at the sound of his voice coming from the other side of the bathroom door. She hadn't heard him enter the bedroom, halfway lost in her own mind, in lament of her own situation. She will need to be better, she thinks, more aware.

Prepared.

She stands, because she doesn't want Will to tower above her, and she opens the bathroom door before he does because she wants to hold onto whatever agency she can.

However pathetic.

"Hello", Will says with a slight smile. He's standing in the middle of the room, giving her lots of space, keeping his distance from her, trying to make her feel safe.

He's poised to strike should she try anything. She can see it.

She doesn't return his smile, but take a couple of steps into the room before stopping,

"How long did I sleep this time?"

They both know that she is grasping for a sense of time, but only Will knows how much of it will be deprived her.

Time. The movement of seconds and hours and days, daylight and moonlight.

Space. Distances, containment, deprivation.

“For a while,” says Will carefully.

She knows she will need to play along, do the right things. She will never get out of here otherwise.

“I see,” she says, and stays where she is. Waits for some kind of cue from him, studies him for signs and ticks and giveaways. But he is so still now, and she just can’t reconcile him with the man from the old video recordings of lectures and interrogations. But she will have to, and fast, or her situation will be even more precarious. She will need to learn how to read the Will Graham that he is now.

A peculiar amalgam of old and new, because she can see softness in him, here, now, she *can*, she knows she can.

Eventually Will takes pity.

“I brought you something to eat,” he says and gestures behind him, towards the desk.

As he says it she can smell the food, and hunger is a living thing just then, a clawed and fanged little animal tearing at her guts. The tap water she gulped down has done nothing for her empty stomach. She tries to think of how long since she’s eaten. A hasty canteen croissant in the morning before she travelled from Quantico to New York, but she doesn’t know how many days and miles lie between then and now.

She walks a generous half circle around Will and looks at the food on the desk. It’s presented on a silver tray. A bowl of soup, richly steaming and smelling wildly delicious. Couple of hunks of bread, freshly baked by the looks of it, yellow butter melting into the surface.

There is quiet but clear humour in Will’s voice as he assures her:

“Vegetable soup. No meat.”

He has turned with her, careful to ensure she’s got him in her eye line. A kindness, she knows, he’s showing her a kindness. He’s as careful and studied as if she’s a skittish wild animal, gentle in his movements, soft in his voice. Trying not to startle her.

But she can see how keenly he studies her. How aware of her he is. If she tried anything she wouldn’t get far.

He’d see to it.

“Anything else in the soup?” she asks archly, with a chutzpah she’s not quite feeling.

“No,” Will says, and she doesn’t believe him.

But, the choice is drugs or starvation, and she thinks she will be less effective starved than she would be drugged. So she pulls out the chair, sits down, picks up the spoon and brings a mouthful of soup to her lips.

It is gorgeous. It seems the stories of Hannibal’s prowess as a chef hasn’t been exaggerated.

She eats more, tries some of the bread too. Just as good.

Once Will sees she’s eating he sits down in the armchair. Makes himself comfortable. For a while there is only silence as she eats, but to her surprise it’s not uncomfortable. Rather, it’s relaxing, and she realises that she is resting against his breaths, leaning on them, as she had when she found her way back from unconsciousness and delusions. She’s using the breaths of Will Graham to *soothe* herself, and that’s terrifying.

So soon...

She shakes her head angrily, sits up straighter.

Will easily picks up on her mood, her thoughts. What chance will she ever have against him?

“You have looked around, realised there is no escape.” It’s not a question, but his voice is soft, oddly compassionate. As if he knows what she’s going through, as if he didn’t go with Hannibal of his own free will.

She doesn’t want to talk with Will about her possibilities of escape.

“I spoke with Alana Bloom,” she says, hoping that mentioning old friends might bring Will to memories of who he used to be.

“Ah,” says Will. “How is Alana?”

“Not very forthcoming.”

He nods, just a fast, sharp jerk of his chin, and suddenly, just for a fraction of a second, she sees the old Will.

“I’m not surprised. She gave her life to Hannibal. He always collects.”

Her mouth goes dry, and she stops eating.

“And...and you’ll let him?”

He’s still again, back to who he is now.

“In so far as I am able, I hope to divert his attention.”

Will’s voice is calm, unruffled.

“And I tried to talk to Bedelia du Maurier,” Clarice says, a creeping horror settling thick on her tongue, making it hard to form words, “but I couldn’t find her.”

“Hannibal ate her.”

Everything she knows tilts sharply sideways, all air leaves the room. She had suspected as much, of course she had, but to have it placidly confirmed by this kind-faced man with his darkness around the edges and his colour shifting eyes...

“Did...did you partake in the meal?”

Will maintains absolute eye contact, unflinching, unapologetic.

“It was several meals, actually. And no, I didn’t, although Bedelia did, for as long as she was able.”

He pauses, considers her.

“Hannibal and I have reached a...compromise, of sorts, where my active participation is concerned.”

He chuckles a little, as if he just said something incredibly funny, but she doesn’t understand the joke. She’s stopped eating, all appetite lost.

He realises, shuffles forward a little bit in the chair, makes to stand.

“You’re tired. You have a lot to take in. Have a bath, Clarice. Get changed. You will feel better for it. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

And he stands and starts for the door, but she calls out for him.

“Will?”

Just like last time she is preventing him from leaving.

When he turns back to her he looks like he knows exactly what she is doing. Of course he knows, she thinks. Of course. She speaks anyway, even though maybe she speaks straight into his hands.

“I want you to promise me something.”

Will shakes his head.

“Promises are precarious and slippery things, Clarice. But I will do what you ask if it is at all within my means to do so.”

She takes a deep breath.

“I appreciate that no ordinary rules apply here. I’m...I’m your captive. At your mercy. But I *do* want you to promise me one thing, Will. I want you to promise me that Dr Hannibal

Lecter won't do to me what he did to Miriam Lass. To you. No shock therapies, no light therapy, no fucking psychic driving."

She stands too, faces him from across the room, even walks a little closer to him. He's taller than her, she notes, with about half a head.

"Whatever happens, I want to keep my own mind. Please, Will. Promise me."

He studies her for a long time, and his gaze slips inside her, becomes something so terribly intimate; dipping into her veins, sliding along her bones. Too much to bear, entirely too much.

Then he nods.

"I'll talk to him."

And he opens the door, steps outside, and she can hear the lock turn.

It had been unlocked the entire time he'd been with her.

She is asleep when he comes to her the first time.

Not ready. Not prepared.

Nothing could prepare her.

She thinks perhaps it is the footfalls that give it away. They have nothing of the slight shuffle that she's already begun to associate with Will Graham.

These are sure and fast and steady.

Deadly.

Enough to wake her, and she sits up in bed when she hears the steps stop outside her door.

The door unlocks, opens, and he steps inside.

She sits up straighter on her bed, studies him quietly just as he studies her. Out of sight her fingers are twisting and pulling at the cover. Twining and rolling, over and over.

He's a big man, enormous and taut, yet graceful of movement. Fluid and certain, a riptide in his wake. Sharp features, timeless, something primordial in them, his gaze as cold as glacier lakes, as vacuum in outer space.

She does not understand how he could fool so many for so long. The man standing in front of her is so clearly *other*. A predator. It is brimming over in his eyes, this curious monstrosity swimming in maroon.

She's terrified. She's enraptured too.

“Hello, Agent Starling.” He turns to indicate the chesterfield behind him. ‘May I sit?’

“Of course,” she answers, because what else can she say?

He sits down, crosses his legs and clasps his hands on his knees. He’s wearing dark slacks and an expensive looking roll neck jumper in mauve. His hair is longer and darker than the photos she’d seen of him from prison, but like Will he hasn’t altered his appearance in any significant ways.

Confident, she thinks. *Fuck*.

“First of all, please accept my condolences. I understand you and Jack Crawford were close.”

“You tried to kill Jack,” she can’t help but answer, even though she knows she ought to acknowledge his courtesy.

“More than once,” he agrees.

“Thank you for the flowers,” she says, and notes just the tiniest twitch of his lip at her abrupt change of subject.

“You are very welcome.” Then: “What did you think of Florence?”

“I loved it,” she says honestly. “I would have liked to stay for longer.”

He inclines his head.

“It is indeed one of the most resplendent cities in all the world. I miss it.”

“Do you think you might go back one day?” she asks, playing at guilenesses, hoping to cause just a pinprick of hurt.

He sees through it immediately.

“I don’t know, Agent Starling. Do you think *you* might?”

Touché, she thinks, and falls silent. He’s quiet too, and she resists the urge to squirm under his gaze. Tries to breathe deeply and stay calm as he takes her in.

She has bathed, and changed into the light grey silk and cashmere provided, the material like sinister whispers against her skin. Somewhere between there and here she lost her hair tie and so is having to wear her long hair loose over her shoulders. She can’t see herself, but she knows she doesn’t look like Clarice. She’s some other creature here, van and unsubstantial, forced to walk a labyrinth she can’t even see.

“You are not as I had imagined,” she tells him.

He steeples his fingers under his chin.

“What then, had you imagined?”

“Something more tightly held. Restrained.”

He smiles, and it’s terrifying in its sharp nakedness, bare and cold, enamel and fangs.

“You forget, Agent Starling, that I no longer have to pretend. No more artifice.”

Ah. She needs movement from his fine threat, and stands from the bed. She moves a little too fast though, and has to cling to the bedpost against an insidious sort of vertigo.

He says nothing as she shakes it off, the nausea and the floor roiling under her feet. With some effort she walks over to the desk, leans back against it. Tries to ground herself to the solid wood, use it to anchor her fear, her fascination.

“Are you drugging me, Doctor Lecter?”

“No,” he says without any hesitation, and she is almost certain that he lies.

“Will you kill me?” she asks next, and is angry with herself for failing to quite hide the waver in her voice. Hannibal smiles a little, just a twitch to one side of the mouth.

”I would rather not. I fear that would upset Will, perhaps even distress him. And wherever feasible I endeavour not to upset or distress Will. Besides which, you are quite fascinating in your own right, Agent Starling. I’ve followed your exploits since Will first brought you to my attention. You remind me, as you no doubt reminded Jack Crawford, of Miriam Lass. Though you burn brighter than her, with that fire in your hair and in your belly, with your single minded need for goodness and justice and light at war with the darkness leaking from your mind. Yes, Agent Starling, I see it. I can practically taste it.”

He stills, and flicks his tongue out as if he’s sampling her darkness on the air between them, and all the shadows in the room are sucked into his eyes.

“With that, you also remind me of Will. But you do not burn brighter than him, I don’t think, just differently. Your elemental alchemy weaves peculiar paths. Will, he walks on dark water. You walk on flames.”

Her throat is dry, and she feels unmoored when falling into his eyes. Like this, sucked into the placid monstrosity of him, she could almost forget that she is a captive, trapped in this opulent room with its rich colours and windowless walls.

She must never forget.

She stays still as Hannibal stands again, inclines his head at her in farewell.

“I disturbed your sleep, Agent Starling. Please do accept my apologies. I will let you get back to it now, and we will converse more soon.”

When he’s almost at the door she speaks again.

“And you, Doctor Lecter? What are you?”

He stops and looks at her over his shoulder, his hair falling into his eyes and his bare teeth morphing into a smile like a scalpel.

“Oh I assure you, Agent Starling. I am just me.” He continues to the door, opens it, pauses one final time. “And please, do call me Hannibal.”

She tries to dig her nails into the wood underneath her, and she wonders how long he will allow her attempts to play these captivity games.

“Then you must call me Clarice.”

He inclines his head, so polite, such a gentleman, before shutting the door behind him.

She listens to the lock clicking shut.

Not for long, she doesn't think.

witching hour

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter 5: witching hour

She thinks that a few days go by.

Four. Maybe five. Six?

She can measure time only in the arrivals of Will Graham, and in the spurious day-rhythm she creates for herself.

When she turns off the lights it's night. When she turns them back on it's day.

She tries to tailor it to the meals Will brings her, tries to ensure that the mornings she creates for herself match up with homemade granola and warm bread and thyme honey. She isn't always successful. She can wake from fitful, broken sleep convinced it's morning, only to be served ragù.

She won't eat that.

It turns out that the vegetable soup served as her first meal here had been a soft start, for all the meals brought to her now, excepting breakfast, contain meat. Delicious looking, voluptuous dishes, brimming with colour and textures, aromas to make her whine deep in her throat.

And presented on enamel plates with plastic cutlery because Will Graham, it appears, is not a fool.

She eats around the meat. The vegetables, the breads, the fruit and the dairy. Not nearly enough to sate her, the meat always determinedly the largest part of the meal.

Sleep is another thing, a fickle thing, elusive and tempestuous. She's never sure if she actually sleeps or just hovers in a dusky hinterland somewhere between awareness and fitful unconsciousness. And sleep deprivation is wretched, she thinks as she lies flat on her back on the bed studying the pretty ceiling, because she can't properly grasp her thoughts. They are slippery, unwilling to conform, rebellious and unbodied. It makes it hard to pull her strength about herself and make a proper plan.

And it's astounding to her how *fast* it goes, how quickly she loses all sense of time and place. And herself. She can't see herself, and sometimes she has to pull up her sleeves and study the skin on her arms to ensure it's not transparent.

Fuck, she thinks, she's a FBI agent and in barely no time at all she's been unmade, hungry and tired and halfway insane. So much for her training.

She assumes she is being looked for, that the FBI is searching high and low. But she also assumes she is very safely hidden. Lecter being something of an expert on the subject after all, she thinks with a sharp, uncomfortable mix of venom and despair.

She learns Will's footsteps, can tell from a distance and through not-quite-slumber when his is the approach. His steps always stop outside the door; Lecter's passes by. The fallen doctor hasn't been to see her since that first time, and for now she is grateful for that.

Will's visits are fast affairs now. He drops off her food and he takes away empty trays and he keeps interaction to a minimum, and of course she knows what he's doing, what *they* are doing. They are playing an erasure game, they are leaving her in this place with no time and no space and soon entire brush strokes of her will be gone.

A painting in reverse, she is a painting in reverse

Will they remake her entirely, in lush egg tempera and with the light of the renaissance behind her? Or will she meld into shadows, a creature in a Caravaggio painting?

After a few of those visits she does exactly what he wants her to do, and initiates conversation. Anything to stave off boredom and terror, anything to pretend for a while that she's not a prisoner. Forget that she knows exactly what is happening to her, that if things continue like this she's helpless to do anything about it.

"I'm curious," she says to his retreating back, stopping him at the very last second... and just like that it's become a comfortable pattern, "why exactly does he think I will eat the meat? Knowing what I know? What everyone knows?"

Will stops just as she had known he would, he turns to her and she relaxes when he looks at her. Gives her some of that deep solemn consideration and gentleness, and all of it so infused with shimmering darkness. Distantly she knows that she shouldn't find relief in his attention, at least not *this early*. But in the absence of a mirror his gaze is the only thing to fill in her contours, make her in flesh and blood, and she will take that even if just for a minute.

He puts the tray down on the desk again, then sits, and she refuses to acknowledge the shiver of delight. Not when he acknowledges it for her, his eyes knowing and clear as he steeples his fingers under his chin.

To keep from twitching.

Ah.

She looks him over with slow, deliberate consideration, because she wants him to know that she is cataloguing him just as much as he is cataloguing her.

Though she's pretty certain he is more successful.

“Hannibal takes great pleasure in the preparation of food,” Will says slowly, willing to indulge her now when she’s played straight into his hands and reached out.

“And the slaughter of it?” she asks with a bluntness she doesn’t quite feel.

“And the slaughter,” Will agrees.

Clarice decides to go a slightly different direction, and yet not.

“I found his other house.”

“I know,” says Will. “That’s when I really started to take note of you. No one else found that house. Not Jack. Not *me*.”

And look where it brought her. She should have been so much more careful, she thinks. So much more.

“What happened there? With Francis Dolarhyde?”

Will just looks at her, and suddenly all she wants is to determine the colour of his eyes.

“I had planned to let Dolarhyde kill him. Went to some pains to get him to target Hannibal. I thought they could take each other out, and I could return to my wife.”

He leans back in the chair, sinks deeper into it.

“I convinced Jack of the set-up. I pushed it through, even though I knew nothing would come of it but bloodbaths and both Hannibal and Dolarhyde on the loose. I *knew* that. But I still made it happen.”

He sighs, and he looks genuinely remorseful but also he does *not*.

“We ended up at Hannibal’s house on the bluff. Had some wine. Then Dolarhyde came through the window. Injured Hannibal something terrible.”

He meets her eyes, square on, and he looks so certain and so uncertain as he touches the scar on his face.

“In the end I couldn’t let Dolarhyde do it. Hannibal and I took him down together. Ripped him to pieces. I... it was... it was *beautiful*.”

Will’s eyes are so wet and so dark, and she can’t quite bear it, wants to touch him but recoil too. His voice is clear and without guile, without apology, as he continues.

“I knew then that I was a monster too. So I threw us both from the cliff.”

The way he says it is so casual and so final, and Clarice’s head spins.

“I was there,” she whispers. “I stood looking down the bluff. How could you possibly have survived?”

“Exactly,” says Will quietly. “How *could* we? Yet we did. I have no idea how. I can’t remember. It was Hannibal’s doing, I’m sure.”

Will stands from the chair, walks to the desk and picks the tray back up. Then stops in front of her, careful to maintain distance but closer than he’s ever been to her before.

“That’s when I stopped fighting it. That’s when I decided to stay with him.”

She says nothing, just meets his gaze, and she struggles to reconcile what he says with the softness around his eyes, the shimmer in them, but then she thinks of the Will Graham she has read about. The Will who had orchestrated the downfall of Hannibal Lecter first from inside prison, then from right by Lecter’s side. The coldness and the darkness of it, the willingness to sink deep inside and *merge*, do unspeakable things just to win.

He had chased Hannibal Lecter to Italy and back, then finally seen him incarcerated. And then... now...

She wants to ask what they are to each other, but finds that the question sticks to her tongue.

Will nods at her.

“I’ll see you.”

Then he leaves again, and she feels almost sad that she will have to hurt him to get out of here.

In a deviation from the rapidly establishing pattern, Lecter brings her next meal.

He unlocks the door and comes through with a tray, disturbing her bleak reverie on the bed. She stands quickly at his entry, unwilling to remain in such vulnerable position with Dr Lecter in the room.

He wears a plaid three piece suit, his hair is impeccable and he carries the tray with effortless elegance and sharp purpose. Nothing like that of Will Graham’s slight shuffle and rather more utilitarian approach to presentation. Indeed, Hannibal removes a silver cloche with a flourish, and she takes a couple of steps forward at the smell and the colours, even though she’s terrified by the large man’s presence.

Reds and greens, vivid contrasts.

“Medallions of meat with lentilles verte du Puy and salsa verde,” he says and fuzzes with the silverware, with the deep red linen napkin. A proper knife and fork, not the utensils of plastic brought her by Will. She wonders if it’s because Will trusts her less, or because Lecter is just that more confident in his ability to keep her in check. Probably the latter, coupled with genuine distaste for plastic cutlery.

“It smells very good,” she says politely, because it really does. The meat is a blushing pink, cooked to medium rare, and the smell of herbs and broth is intoxicating.

Lecter finishes setting out the meal and turns to her fully.

“You don’t eat any of the meat I prepare for you.”

She’s surprised, startled really, by her own genuine laugh, even if it’s shrill and hurting her own ears.

“Can you blame me?”

Lecter ignores her question, rather like she thought he would.

“You are fading, Clarice. No sunshine, no fresh air.” He makes no mention of the coerced nature of this, and his part in her confinement. “A good and varied diet is imperative for your health.”

She wants to scoff at him and his manipulation, but he’s also got a point. She’s feeling faint, she struggles against confusion, and not all of that can be ascribed to the drugs she’s convinced are put in her food. She’s not getting enough nutrients, and she’s not getting enough exercise. She needs to remedy both.

Of course, that on its own is not enough to convince her to eat the meat offered her by Lecter.

But much, much more importantly, just as with Will, she needs Hannibal to lower his guard if she’s to have any hope of getting out of here. She’ll need to play. She’ll *have* to play.

How bad can it be? How bad can it get?

She walks over and sits down by the desk and delicately spreads the red linen napkin over her lap. Maintaining eye contact with Lecter she picks up the fork and spears one of the tender medallions on it. Brings it to her mouth, bites down, chews carefully.

Swallows.

It’s delicious.

She hopes it’s pork.

Quite deliberately she allows some red juice from the meat to dribble down her chin, before dabbing it away with a corner of the napkin. Lecter looks enraptured, but he looks knowing too. She’s in no doubt that he sees through her skin and hair and bones straight into her brain, understands what she is doing, but she will simply have to keep going. Keep playing, keep trying. Wait for the right moment. He can’t keep vigilant all the time.

He can’t.

She takes another mouthful before speaking again. Begins the same way as with Will.

“I’m curious, Hannibal. Why are you doing this? You know, I’ve read the trial transcripts and Will’s debriefings and all other available material. You, you appear to be endlessly curious. You poke and you prod your subjects, you seem to think of humanity as something quite fascinating... yet you strike me as easily bored. Those of your kills that we know about have all been different. Elaborate, artistic. Gruesome, almost beautiful. And never the same. Why then repeat history by kidnapping a female protegee of Jack Crawford’s? Bit samey, don’t you think?”

Lecter straightens his slacks then sits down on the Chesterfield. There is nothing on his face other than a placid mask, but she thinks she sees amusement in the fine lines around his mouth.

“Miss Lass was an unexpected complication. I had to think on my feet. Of course, I did find a purpose for her. I weaved her into the tapestry of a greater plan, turned her into an alibi.”

And *how* Jack Crawford and Frederick Chilton had suffered for that.

“It’s different with you. You, you were planned. And, most crucially: not *my* plan.”

Will’s then.

He follows her, as intimate with her thoughts as if he is sliding his fingers on top of them, along every kink and knot, and she can’t fathom how someone so *other* can understand the human mind so well.

“Will, Will is not quite like me. When you became a threat, in the first instance he wanted to try and see a way to let you live. And I am loath to deny him anything.”

She eats another mouthful of meat, dipped in the salsa verde.

“Is that so?”

Lecter regards her thoughtfully, still, so terrifyingly *still*. She hates that about him, how he keeps himself so tightly reined that she can read nothing of him. Just a slippery outline that she can find no purchase on.

“Will told me that the two of you spoke about that night at my beach house. What happened. I brought Will there without any real idea of the outcome. I didn’t know whether I would kill Will, or be killed myself. But when I saw him calmly sip his wine and watch with curiosity how Mr Dolarhyde prepared to *change* me, that’s when I knew I could never let him go.”

Hannibal pauses, for a second looks almost wry.

“For all his attempts to the contrary.”

She’s finished all her food.

He stands from the chair, collects the tray, nods at her and makes to leave the room. By the door, however, he pauses and turns to her. Absently she ponders his and Will’s willingness to give her their backs, but loses the train of thought when Hannibal speaks again.

“At this stage I am only guessing at Will’s *true* reasons for keeping you. They are...good guesses, but guesses non the less. And, Clarice, at this very moment in time I do not share them. That being the case, believe me when I say that I will not hesitate to take...action should you in any way become a threat to mine and Will’s existence.”

Oh, she believes him.

She had thought to let it go longer before she tried anything. Get Lecter and Will to, well, not *trust* her, but at least lower their guards a modicum. Give her more of a head start.

But she can’t bear it. Can’t bear the confinement, the way her mind slips and slides, how her thoughts ricochet wildly. The way boredom is paired so disjointedly with terror, chafing her, hurting her.

It makes her act recklessly, and she *knows* it’s reckless, she really does. It’s just that she is unable to stop herself, even though, objectively speaking, her plan is terrible. It’s not even a plan, she concedes as she stands with her back pressed against the wall next to the door; it’s a knee-jerk reaction. It’s nothing that reflects her training or usual cool mind, it’s something born out of deep disquiet and a primal conviction she’s about to be taken *down*. Instinctive fear, curled in her hind brain, buried notions left behind from generations before her, unthinking and unyielding.

Instincts deep in her marrow.

She knows all this, but it means nothing.

She listens where she stands, and once again she considers the ease with which she has learnt the herald of Will Graham. His steps. How she knows them already, can tell his approach. How the way his feet move against the hard floor can make her feel anticipation, tarnished joy, expectation. Fear.

Yes, his steps, she knows his steps. They are coming for her now and he, with his smile and new hair and uneven soul, soon he will unlock and walk through.

She takes deep breaths as she stands there and waits for the door to open. She knows she can do this. She is not yet so weakened that she can’t fight and run.

When Will steps through she doesn’t allow herself to hesitate, not even for a second. She flies into motion so sharp and unhinged that she struggles to keep up with herself. Throws a punch with all her might towards the side of his face presented to her, the side with the scar. Impacts his temple with a force that reverberates through her elbow up to her shoulder, almost numbs her arm. It certainly bruises her knuckles, and Will goes down on his knees in a mess of utilitarian tableware, consommé and homemade dinner rolls. She bends, picks up the fallen tray and then brings it down hard over his head, sending him the rest of the way down to the floor in a wild sprawl.

She doesn't check to see if he's unconscious. She leaves the room and she runs.

Out into a long dark corridor flanked to one side by large windows, and she is faintly surprised to see the silhouettes of naked treetops in her peripheral. She had thought she was held in a basement, not a floor or two up. She sees light further ahead, and instinctively she shies away from it, spinning and running in the opposite direction. She ignores the chill in her bare feet, can focus only on finding a way out.

At the end of the hall she finds a narrow staircase with an abandoned, dusty smell about it, clearly not in much use. It creaks hideously as she rushes down two steps at a time, but she can think of nothing but how she's clearly towards the back of this unknown house, how it's hopefully less travelled.

Downstairs her cold feet hit even colder marble, and she's in yet another dark hallway, windowless this time. She darts into the first room she comes across, hoping for a door leading outside.

It's an office in shadow, heavy furniture just suggestions in the cold blue darkness, but she takes no notice of particulars. Her attention is stolen by a large window. She looks through it, and it brings her motion to a stop.

Winter. She's attempting to escape in full winter, barefoot and in loungewear. In New York it had been early spring, cold rain and bitter winds. But here, wherever it is she has been brought... She takes in the vistas in front of her.

There is that peculiar silence of a snowy night, blanketed and peaceful. Unfair, out of place, she thinks over her beating heart, the rush of iron in her mouth. She stands before the floor to ceiling vaulted window, framed by velvet curtains and stares at all the snow. So much white, lit by a swollen waxing gibbous. And far away, yes, all the way over there: a dark treeline streaks like a black wound across the landscape.

If she runs in that direction she will be entirely unprotected, laid bare by snow and moon. Still she tries the window, finds it locked, and turns to hurry out of the room and continue down the hall. She rushes along and by now, when this much time has passed since her escape from her room, the silence is oppressive. She should be hearing shoes against the marble floor, movement, the renting of air.

She should be hearing *pursuit*, and this nothing is terrifying to her. What are they doing?

She darts into another room situated on the opposite side of the corridor. Large, grand even, bisected by an enormous dining table. She's ducking outside again, having no wish to loiter in Hannibal Lecter's fucking *dining room*, when something bothers her peripheral.

It's outside the enormous window on the far side of the room, something marring all the white out there. Something darker than shadows, blacker than midnight. She violently interrupts her forward motion, slides to a halt, turns towards the window.

The *stag*. The stag is standing out there, looking at her through the glass.

It looks the same as always, and she realises that she has missed it in her captivity, used as she has grown to the beast as a near constant companion. This otherworldly creature, eerie, solid. She can see its feathers move in the wind, the thorny antlers outlined by the moon, frosty breath curling from flared nostrils. All the things reflected in its dark eyes, just out of reach for her, but if only she could *touch* it.

She had come so close in New York. So *close*.

She walks around the large table and all the way up to the window, puts a hand on the glass, wonders what the beast wants with her now. Has it come to lead her away from here, or trap her even more?

“What are you?” she whispers, and watches how her breath fogs the smooth pane, distorting the stag into just a black shape behind condensation.

And when it clears again she sees Hannibal Lecter’s face in chiaroscuro, reflected in the glass.

He’s behind her.

She whirls around. He stands in the lone entrance to the room, faint light behind him, the dining table between them. He looks relaxed, at ease, but she can see the murder in his outline.

“What caught your attention out there?” he asks, head at a slight tilt, something like curiosity in his eyes, imperturbable and dark. Not at all like he’s hunting her, has for all intents and purposes cornered her.

“None of your business,” she answers, even as she looks for a way around him.

There isn’t one.

Well. No option. She will have to go *through* him, and she squares her shoulders, ready to strike out, attack, if or when he gets close enough to her.

Then he moves slowly into the room, starts to come around the table towards her. His smile is cruel, venom dripping from his teeth, his eyes heavy with an odd gravity. Or a *lack* of gravity.

But she can only truly focus on the arched door opening, how he leaves it gaping and unprotected. She moves with him, matches him step for step. Ensures that the distance between them remains the same, that the large table is always between them. If she can get close enough to the doorway, if she can make a run for it... She’s so much smaller than him, so much lighter. And she’s a runner, a creature of flight.

She’s confident in her ability to outrun him if only given a fair chance.

The man stalking her doesn’t look like he’s in the business of handing out chances, fair or otherwise. He’s coiled and poised, his nostrils flared as if her intentions are scents on the air between them. Maybe they are to him, she thinks; never before has she seen a human being look so like a predator.

A couple of steps closer to the door, Lecter following her on his side of the table, his fingertips leisurely stroking the table top as he goes.

“I would strongly advise you against this, Agent Starling. Come with me now and I’ll say no more of this. You have my word.”

Agent Starling. Not Clarice. That more than anything strengthens her resolve to run, to beat him, because if he catches her she is quite unsure that he’ll let her live.

She takes one step, then two more, then judges that she’s close enough that she might reach the doorway, go beyond, if she’s faster than she’s ever been before.

And she will be. She will *have* to be.

On the other side of the table Lecter smiles at her. He knows precisely what she’s planning, there can be no doubt. No matter. She’s close to the door; he’s too far.

She launches herself forward, and she’s sure that she’s never run so fast.

But, even with all that she knows about Dr. Hannibal Lecter she is still entirely unprepared for what he actually *is*. Unprepared for the savage speed, how he vaults himself clear across the table in one leap and lands in front of her. He moves like a ballet dancer, lethal grace and fluidity, the outlines of him blurring with motion.

He’s supernaturally fast, she thinks as she launches herself at him, desperation and primal fear seeing her airborne and coming at him swinging. Despite everything she’s confident in her body, her movements, her strength.

Lecter dodges her, calmly takes a step back that sees her hurtling past him, robbed of an impact, the force of her motion carrying her forward so violently that she barely stays on her feet.

Then, just like that, he’s behind her. Faster than what is reasonable, than she can fathom, his large hand slams over her jugular.

And he immediately starts squeezing.

Such brute force.

Taking her air away from her like it was always his, never ever hers.

He pulls her backwards into him, her back pressed to his front. His heart beats steady and slow between the sharp wings of her shoulder blades, while her own thrashes like a dying bird in her chest. His other arm comes up over her collarbone, cages her, and she writhes against the sensation of having her life crushed out of her. He rests his chin on her crown and she can feel him nuzzling her hair, her struggles seeming a trifle to him, her gasps for breath a melody as sensual as Goldberg’s Variations. His grip on her is as effortless as it is casual.

“Remember Beverly Katz” whispers Alana Bloom in her head, and vain notions crumble to ash on her tongue even as she slams her head back, hoping to break his nose.

He whips his head away in time, and her punishment is immediate as he leans backwards, his much greater stature bringing her feet clean off the ground. She kicks, but what can her bare feet ever do against the immense solidness of him?

One of his strong thighs comes out to support her though, resting against her backside. It prevents her entire weight hanging suspended from her throat, and with that it occurs to her that he'll likely not kill her.

No, this is a polite rebuke, an admonishment for her temerity in attempting to escape her prison.

Nevertheless, she can feel how she is slipping now. It's a tangible thing, her consciousness measured in every breath she's unable to take. The panic is ugly, and it's shameful. She has always prided herself on keeping a straight head, staying calm.

Not even in Jame Gumb's basement did she feel this terrified.

She renews her fighting, but it's just twitches really, a vain scrabbling of nails against Lecter's wrists, something he seems to shrug off as a mere inconvenience. Her vision hurtles down a tunnel now, it's shadows and grey on all sides, blackness just ahead.

Lecter bows his head and rests his chin on her shoulder, his cheek brushing hers. He shushes her, the hand not strangling her coming up to gently stroke her hair.

"This is how I subdued Miriam Lass," he murmurs straight into her skull, his lips on the delicate shell of her ear, and she shivers. Is struck by the thought that he might suddenly bite down, tear a piece of her away. "She lost consciousness very quickly. Would you like to stay conscious, Agent Starling?"

She tries to get her mouth to work, to form just one tiny little word. Impossible.

"Well?" he prompts, even as he squeezes harder, as she hangs helpless between his hand and his thigh.

But she can't speak. She tries to nod, her eyes wide against the dark of the dining room, but she's not sure he takes note of it. It certainly would seem not, with the way he holds her like he will never ever let her go. But he must have felt her motion, because he gives her throat one last squeeze, releases it, and gently lowers her back down to the floor.

"Good girl."

She wants to fall to the ground and curl up around the pain in her esophagus, choke on fresh new air and her failure, but he's got a hard grip around her arm now and won't allow it. She bends by her waist instead, tries to collect herself, tries to gather up those pieces of herself that Lecter so carelessly has thrown all over the marble floor.

He barely expended any effort, and she is halfway unmade. Perhaps, even knowing what she does of him, what a violent beast he is, she had never expected that he would use brute force

to bring her to heel. Rather, she had prepared herself for emotional manipulation, the psychic driving she had begged Will to prevent from happening to her.

Of course, she thinks, as she stands in the remains of her courage, she had changed any unwritten rules when she decided to run.

He strokes her hair again, seems to have entirely abandoned the careful physical distance he's so courteously maintained with her up until now. Indeed, as she straightens up again he wraps his arm around her. It's as much in support as it is in restraint, and she is too weak right now to recoil away from him.

"Shall we go back to your room?"

Rhetorical, of course, as he doesn't wait for an answer before gently urging her along, his manner now so at odds with the brutal way he strangled her that her mind is struggling to keep up.

Before they leave the room she turns with difficulty to look back out of the window.

The stag is gone, vanished, no trace of its presence out on the pristine snow.

She tries to note her surroundings, memorise the way back to her room. But the large house is kept in darkness, and her mind is doing strange things, flickering like static. Once again, the impressions are those only of winding hallways and large, cavernous rooms off to the sides, of massive windows and lush furnishings. Nothing helpful. She shakes her head, tries to clear it from the haze of drugs she's sure is in her system, but it's no good.

Hannibal leads her back upstairs via a much grander staircase than the one she came down, an imperial one with elaborate, baroque railings.

"Will?" she asks Hannibal as they go up it, her voice less than a whisper, broken to shreds underneath his grip. He hears her just fine though. His hold on her tightens, and his jaw clenches in the corner of her eye, but his voice is smooth as he answers her.

"Will is resting in his room. You caused him no lasting damage, but he is prone to headaches as it is."

He offers no further information, and Clarice shivers with cold.

Back at her cell he politely holds the door open for her to allow her to enter before him. She does so without protest, right now thoroughly chastised and docile. There is no mess of spilled food and upended plates on the floor, and she wonders if Lecter took the time to tidy before he went to retrieve her.

Such insult.

She is helped to her bed, and instead of taking the chair, or just leaving, Lecter sits down next to her, his shoulder touching hers, a grip on her wrist that plays at being gentle but isn't. Indeed, there is an awful kind of intimacy in his hold, his strong fingers on one of her rushing

life veins, the fragile, birdlike bones underneath. She wonders if he thinks about bringing her wrist to his mouth and biting down.

“How did you kill Francis Dolarhyde?” she asks, voice a rasp, like nails down a chalkboard to her own ears.

“I tore his jugular out with my teeth,” Lecter answers simply.

“What a glutton you are.”

He chuckles a little then.

“And Will disembodied him. Of course, Mr Dolarhyde didn’t go down without a brave fight. And in the end, he got to experience his true becoming. He became the Red Dragon. And Will and I, we finally came together in the cerebral way I had envisioned since the first day I met him.”

He changes the subject then, before she can delve deeper.

“Now, you’ve disappointed me this evening, and you’ve abused our hospitality. I want to see nothing more of this sort of behaviour from you. You are to behave and attempt no more stunts such as this. I will not be so forgiving next time. There will be consequences.”

“You are cruel.”

“‘Cruel’”? he repeats, and the word sounds like it’s beautiful to him, comfortable on his blood-soaked tongue. “All of *humanity* is cruel, Agent Starling, made that way by an unbridled, tempestuous God. Wild atrocities and pettiness, mindless, naive evil. Tell me, have you heard of JoJo?” At her blank look he shakes his head. “Of course you haven’t. I collect stories like these, just like I collect church collapses. JoJo was a chimp. Taken from his mother as a baby and taught sign language for a scientific study. He became quite proficient too, the level of a three year old human child. Of course, the study ran out of funding as studies often do, and JoJo was sold to a HIV research lab.”

His finger starts tracing the network of veins on her wrist, and she thinks he can feel the way her heart beats, violently, senselessly, entirely without her leave.

“He would be given different vaccines,” Lecter continues, quite merciless and blank, “then a shot of HIV. And there he sat in his little cage, stuffed full of a virus attacking his cells, signing “OUT! OUT!” to anyone who would pass by his prison. Do you know, the cruelty of *that* astounds even me. A sentient, intelligent creature is torn away from its natural life. It is given a means to communicate *with* humanity *by* humanity, and when it tries to use this gift, this remarkable cognitive ability, to get itself away from an unbearable life... it is just ignored.”

“What happened to him?” she whispers and fights a toxic, roiling nausea.

“Died of massive organ failure a few years down the line. And that, *that* is humanity.”

She's shaking. Well, she's shaking *still*, and she doesn't understand what he wants her to feel. She detests him for hurting her, for caging her, for rubbing her nose in his own twisted worldview. He's still travelling her veins with his fingers, a little too hard, like he wants to break through the paper thin skin and put his fingerprints on her blood. Bend her and warp her. It makes her want to lash out, even though it's the last thing she should be doing right now.

The very last.

But no matter.

"Will tried to kill you both. He told me. Don't you think you ought to have let him?"

A sudden coldness to him, a chill worse than the winter she has only just seen through glass.

"Don't be rude, Agent Starling."

"I want you to call me Clarice again."

She deliberately lilts the last word upwards, turns it into a question that way, because she senses that it would annoy him. That he would find it crass and common. And indeed she sees an infinitesimal tick, just his left cheek moving, and she's right.

"I think not. You've lost your right to be on a first name basis. After what just took place, it wouldn't be proper. You will need to earn it back."

"Really, *Hannibal*?" Deliberately she falls into more of her natural drawl, lets the twang infuse her words, and she feels imbued by childhood that way. "After all this time, after you've been so thoroughly unmasked, when you walk the world as nothing but *what you are*... still you insist on the pretension that propriety matters? *You eat beating hearts.*"

She's angered him, she can see it in how his mouth tightens just so. Sometime during their struggles his hair was ruffled, it's falling over his forehead now, and she sees the beast in him, clear as day, right there just under his skin. The maroon in his eyes, the predatorial dips and curves of his thin mouth.

"My desire for politeness and decorum was never part of the act, Agent Starling."

He gives her wrist one last hard squeeze then stands and walks for the door. Everyone is always leaving her, she thinks, and she feels hysterical, murderous, terrified.

Lonely.

"Sure thing, Doc!" she cheerfully says to his retreating back, all West Virginia now, all mountain trash.

She curls up on the bed as soon as the door shuts behind him, and she cries for the first time since all this began.

Chapter End Notes

Oooof, this update took longer than I'd planned - it was a very hard chapter to write. At least it's quite long. I'd love to know what you think of it :)

dawn

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter 6: dawn

She's left alone, and it's a blessing.

She stops crying, exhausted from the effort, and it's not like it will help. She pours a bath. Fills the ridiculous tub all the way up to the rim and steps in, water sloshing over the sides. It's almost unbearably hot, but she sinks down until only her mouth and nose is above the surface. She's trying to soothe her bruised throat, gentle all the aches and pains of Lecter's manhandling.

Her other baths here had been fast, perfunctory affairs, Clarice aware that her captors could step through the door at any time. But now she intends to take her time. Somehow, she suspects they will let her be for a good while.

And also, right now she doesn't give a *fuck*.

She lies there, arms spread, long hair floating on the surface, her hearing distorted by water. She stares up into the ceiling and tries to pull her frayed mind together.

Think. Evaluate. Plan.

Well, that escape attempt had not worked out.

At all.

She is the first to acknowledge that it had been a hasty, desperately cobbled-together affair, but then she had hardly any tools with which to devise and carry out an escape. She simply acted on what she had available, which was nothing.

Now she's got less than that.

Now she has shown her hand *and* she deliberately riled Hannibal at the end of it. He had been...displeased and, in retrospect, the look on his face when he left her had been terrifying. She wonders what he would be like *truly* enraged and then decides not to dwell on it.

She had gravely underestimated him, and that had been unforgivably foolish. Of course, she thinks, of course he would be an efficient, skilled predator. How many kills to his name? Countless. And she had thought that she could outrun him, *best* him.

Well, now she knows brute strength and speed won't work.

And she will have to start over from the beginning.

She will have to play along. Smile, converse. Share of herself. *Engage*.

The first goal is to be let out of the room.

Then she will have to take it from there.

Will brings her breakfast.

She keeps a careful distance, stands very still by the far wall as he places the tray on the desk as usual. There is a bruise the size of her fist on his temple and a deep darkness in his demeanour. One she does not like.

She decides to speak first.

"I apologise."

He turns to her, and he does not look amused.

"And for what exactly," he sits down on the Chesterfield, "- do you apologise, Clarice?"

She's faintly relieved that he's still using her first name.

"For attacking you."

He raises a brow, crosses his legs. The economy and precision of his movements reminds her of Lecter, so too the even voice. It's unsettling.

"Not for trying to escape?"

Her answer is immediate.

"It's obvious I would try to escape. I've been kidnapped. I don't know where I am. Would you not have done the same?"

He doesn't answer her question, but then he doesn't need to.

Of course he would have done the same.

"But I regret hurting you," she reiterates, and she is vaguely surprised to realise that she almost means it. He is a complex, incredibly gifted man, and he's been kind within the parameters of this situation. Had they met under normal circumstances she thinks she might have liked him.

He smiles a little as he's studying her, as if he's privy to her thoughts, as if he can pull strings of words and sentences straight out of her temples.

Maybe he can.

But his voice, when he speaks, is cold and clear.

"You asked for my protection against Hannibal, Clarice."

"I didn't..."

"Oh, but you did. You *did*. And then you hit me over the head and you ran."

She quiets again. Considers. Will is not nearly as terrifying as Lecter, nor as corrupted in his fall. He fell such comparatively short while ago, after all. He is the weak link, she thinks, the one through which an escape may eventually be possible.

He shakes his head.

"Oh no. No. No, don't do that."

"Do what?"

"You're *comparing* us, Clarice. You're deciding that I'm the safer option. Don't do that. More importantly, don't *think* that. It would be a mistake."

"I am not," she murmurs through stiff lips. "I'm not thinking that."

He shakes his head.

"You're playing games with yourself. At least grant me the grace of not playing them with *me*."

"Playing games?" she repeats. "Then tell me Will, what games do you play? I'm told it was your idea to bring me here. I think it's pretty rich to kidnap me, then accuse me of manipulation."

Her voice soars louder with the last word, and she's moved away from the wall, stalked halfway across the floor towards him before she catches herself. Her fists are clenched, her chin raised.

Will's smile is wider now, and maybe-real. Slowly he strokes the shiny, ugly scar down the side of his face.

"When I came into this room you were determined to act the good little captive, weren't you? Apologise, play along. That didn't last long, did it?"

He sits calmly in the chair, head tilted back. If he sees her as a threat as she stands above him, he doesn't show it. He's not a big man, but he's wiry. Without the element of surprise, or weapons, she doubts her ability to take him on. No wonder he looks relaxed.

“Why did you really bring me here?”

Will inclines his head.

“I believe Hannibal told you that the alternative would be something of a more.. *final* nature.” he says, again not really answering her question, and it is so exhausting to try to find answers hiding between the things not spoken.

She sinks down on the bed. She’s now within too easy a reach of him, but she doesn't think she’s got any violence to expect, of a reciprocal nature or otherwise.

“It was you who advocated for...keeping me.”

“That’s right,” he says, and once more she is left wondering about Will Graham’s mind. Quantities and measures. Weights and distances. Light and dark. The density of darkness, is it different to that of light? Inside, is he of dappled shadows? Or is the light left in him like that of a star long dead?

No more than an echo.

“Strays,” she murmurs, looking at the floor.

“I’m sorry?”

“You. You used to collect stray dogs, didn't you? I read that in your files. And you treat me like one of them. You try to save me. You try to calm me, *gentle* me. Get me to lick your hand.”

His smile is sharp. It doesn’t reach his eyes.

“By that logic I should ignore bad behaviour, reward good. Is that what you are saying?”

She doesn’t want to answer his question. There are too many implications, too many traps. Too many things suggested that she isn’t ready to explore. Maybe she never will be.

“What’s your endgame, Will? Is it for me to beg for your affection? And does your endgame dovetail with that of Hannibal’s?”

He doesn’t want to answer her questions either. He gestures over to the desk, where the breakfast tray stands abandoned.

“Why don’t you eat?”

She shakes her head. She didn’t have dinner last night, what with it ending up all over Will and the floor, and she has been drinking tap water. As a consequence her head is clearer than it’s been since she arrived here.

“I’m not hungry,” she says. Then: “It’s the stag, isn’t it?”

“I’m sorry?” says Will.

“That’s why you don’t want to kill me. Because I see the stag too. You told me on my first day here that I’m alive because you’re *curious*.”

He says nothing, but leans forward, towards her, elbows on knees and those eyes of his - how she wishes she could name the colour - they are focused on her temple.

“You know, I saw it again. Last night, through the dining room window. Just before Hannibal...” she goes silent, can’t bring herself to set Hannibal’s capture into words. How easily and elegantly he overpowered her, how brutally he bent her to his will. The way he touched her, moved her, *ruled* her. “Tell me what it means,” she implores. “I know you know.”

Will, he once again slides past her wishes, avoids them as gracefully as Hannibal subdues.

“Hannibal...he lies with the truth, you know. You can’t win over him. Ever.”

She leans forward too, where she sits on the bed. They could almost touch each other, they are so close.

“What do you...”

“So stop fighting it. Stop fighting him. Stop scheming. Accept this situation. *Be polite*. For your sake.”

Or Hannibal will kill you, he doesn’t say, but the words hover in the air between them, clear for them both to see.

He seems almost agonised right now, with those words, and she’s wondering if he’s playing her. Then she wonders if he’s capable. Then she berates herself. *Of course* he’s capable.

More capable than most. He had, after all, managed to play even Hannibal

So many layers and nooks, and she can’t stop contemplating him; his face that can still be kind, his eyes that can still be soft. The lines curving like gently winding paths around his brow, from his mouth. She could travel those roads of him, she thinks, she could learn more. Maybe, just maybe, she could understand.

And for the first time since she arrived here she wonders if it might be possible to save Will Graham.

She knows he only wants to meet a gaze on his own conditions; as a tool, a weapon. She insists now though. She touches him voluntarily for the very first time, a gentle two fingers under his chin to make him look at her.

“You did. You fought it.”

Will looks away again, and she lets go of him. Respects the boundaries of her captor.

“Yes. Yes I did. But at great cost.”

“And now? You’ve stopped fighting. You’ve stopped fighting him, you’ve stopped fighting yourself.”

“I have,” he agrees. “God knows I tried. I tried many times, I tried many ways. But, Clarice, I truly do believe that Hannibal and I are conjoined. And the relief when I finally gave myself over... you have no idea.” He meets her eyes then, straight on, and he smiles a little. “Right now, I’m as close to peace as I am ever likely to get.”

The smile shimmers in Will’s eyes, his agony and lust for murder turned into something beautiful. He doesn’t *want* to be saved.

And just like that, Clarice understands why Hannibal Lecter loves Will Graham so much.

Later, Hannibal comes to her with a chair. Another Chesterfield, green, matching the drapes. He carries it with casual grace, as if it weighs absolutely nothing at all.

She knows those things are heavy. She knows because she tried to pick hers up and throw it against the door on her second day here. Or maybe it was the third.

He puts it down on the floor in the middle of the room, then pulls out its oxblood sibling from the corner. When the chairs are facing each other he sits, and with a small gesture invites her to do the same.

She obliges, and as she takes a seat she realises that he has arranged the chairs to be so close that their legs touch.

She doesn’t move away, and his knee is warm against hers.

“I’m in therapy now?”

“The chair suits you, agent Starling. The green against your hair,” he answers.

“Thank you,” she says, and inclines her head.

“I trust you have recovered from last night?” He eyes her throat. It’s a tactile thing, that gaze, delicate, yet she can clearly feel it brush the thin, fragile skin covering her jugular. He had not been delicate last night, nor gentle.

She thinks he dreams about biting down.

“Just about, yes,” she answers politely, hands clasped on her lap. “I would like to apologise for that. I was very rude.”

He sits in silence, relaxed as he looks her over. She’s in yet another silk and cashmere lounge set, taupe, and she carded her fingers through her hair earlier to tidy it up. She’s looking as

good and as neat as she can considering she's barefoot and tired and unable to see herself.

"I appreciate your apology, agent Starling. Discourtesy is unspeakably ugly to me."

She wonders at this man, this well mannered murderer doing ugly things in such beautiful ways, and she suspects that to truly understand him would mean insanity.

"And it was a very foolish thing to do, though I suppose you getting a look around does serve a purpose," he continues. "Now you know you wouldn't get very far."

"If you say so," she answers blandly, and resists the urge to curl up on the chair, draw her knees up underneath her and become small.

"Will tells me you're not eating."

"I've had some time for re-evaluation, and I've concluded that I'd rather be hungry with a sound mind than sated and confused," she says clearly, but she tenses, and surely he can feel that against his legs.

Hannibal smiles. It's terrifying. But when he speaks it's words of supposed conciliation.

"I realise now that I... *we* have gone about this wrong. And so I propose we start over. Get to know each other a little better."

"I'm listening," she answers, and wonders if what he will suggest could lead to more autonomy, or snare her even more. With Hannibal, she thinks, it would be both things at the same time, but more of the latter.

"I wish to find out more about you, agent Starling. You are, after all, a valued guest, and we are likely to spend a lot of time in each other's company. So, how about this: you tell me things, and I tell you. I will ask you about yourself. For each of my questions that you answer truthfully you may ask me a question in return. Or," he touches a finger to his lips, "- request a boon."

"A boon?"

"A boon," he confirms placidly. "You might, for instance, request a cessation of the drugs."

She looks at him, at his eyes that give nothing away, his cruel mouth, the sharp angles of his face that ricochets shadows in ways she's never seen before. In the case of Dr Hannibal Lecter, there can be no question of quantities; he is only of dark. There can also be no question that there is tremendous danger in what he suggests, she can sense it, can feel how the situation slips and slides out of her grasp.

And she knows that she is looking at this from a precipice. That she will have to jump from it before she falls, or is pushed. Because she can't remain like this forever, and she'd rather proactively break the status quo than be forced into it.

"I agree."

“Excellent. Oh, but Clarice...” here he pauses, looks at her with a finger in the air “- may I call you Clarice again?”

“Of course,” she says, and it comes out as a croak.

He smiles, and his hand comes down on her leg, just above her knee. It’s warm, and heavy. He doesn’t offer to let her call him Hannibal again.

“It’s unequivocal honesty only. From me, and from you. I give you *my* word. Will you give me yours?”

She nods.

“Say it, Clarice.”

“I promise,” she whispers, “I give you my word, Dr Lecter.” And she means it, because she knows, she just *knows*, that he can smell falsehoods. She will give him all of her honesty, and then she will get out of here.

“Very well.” He sits back, and slides his hand from her leg. Their knees keep touching.

“Tell me, what were you hoping to achieve by tracking me down, finding me? And don’t insult my intelligence by saying “for Jack”.”

Her answer is immediate.

“I wanted your knowledge, your insights into the human psyche, specifically disturbed psyches. I wanted to somehow untwist the evil you have done and fashion it into something good. Use it. To help people.”

“You fancy yourself an alchemist, Clarice? You hope to turn death to gold?”

“Yes,” she says. Then: “That was two questions, Dr. Lecter.”

“You are quite right. I apologise. What question would you like answered then, or, what boon would you request?”

“Why did you kill Abigail Hobbs?”

There’s a queer look on his face, one she hasn’t seen before, and she thinks that perhaps she’s surprised him. And there are...resonances in his voice when he answers, acoustics and whispers from a deep cave inside, one with no natural light.

“Will had hurt me. I wanted to hurt him back.”

“”Hurt him back”,” she repeats.

“It was, with the benefit of hindsight, something of an overreaction.”

“An overreaction.” She’s aware that she sounds shrill, but she can’t help it. In trying to comprehend him she finds only incomprehension. “Slitting the throat of a frightened, deeply traumatised teenage girl right in front of the one person that cared the most for her...an *overreaction*?”

“That’s two questions, Clarice.”

She draws a deep breath.

“I apologise,” she parrots him. Then waves her hand in a “your turn” gesture. He picks up right where she made him leave off.

“How, pray tell, were you thinking to use this knowledge of mine, and, I suspect, Will’s? Did you intend to put us in a box each and take us out and ask us nicely whenever you needed our insights?”

She draws a breath to answer, but he carries on:

“You know, I once attempted to eat Will’s brain. I could think of no other way to truly know his mind. Did you think to do something similar with me?”

“What? No! Of course not, I...”

He is quite merciless as he continues.

“Come now, Clarice. You want to know and use my mind, just like you want to know and use Will’s. What better way to do that than by taking us *inside* yourself?”

She is surprised over the heat she feels at his words, the shiver and the almost languorous sensation as she leans forward in her chair towards him; it’s involuntary, and her breaths going shallow.

He mimics her, leans forward too. Calm. Sure. A slight smile as he closely studies her face.

“Ah yes, here comes that darkness. It makes your eyes glow. A fascinating prospect, don’t you think, to do good with abyssal urges. To light-paint with darkness. A delicate balance to manage. Do you think you could?”

There is a susurrus in the room, or maybe it’s in her head? It’s that of a thousand wings trashing against walls. She struggles to center herself, to climb back up and out from the emotions he’s awakened in her. Now is not the time to study them, get to know them, analyse them. She will have to do that later, in privacy.

Oh god, and she’s sure that he has barely begun to scratch the surface.

“Yes, Dr Lecter. I had intended, in so far it was possible, to capture one or both of you alive. I had hoped to build a relationship of mutual trust and benefit with one or both of you while you were incarcerated. And, I don’t know if I could manage that delicate balance that you mention, but I would hope I could. I would have to at least *try*. To help. To do *good*.”

“Are you being honest with yourself now, Clarice? Was *that* your plan? Leaving aside the tedious bureaucracies of the FBI that would likely deny you access if you’d succeeded, had you really intended to capture us both? Or were you perhaps planning, or hoping, for something else?”

She struggles to steady her breaths, to regain solid ground, to get Hannibal Lecter *out of her head*.

“Dr Lecter. That’s two questions of yours I answered already. Now I am owed two boons in return.”

He hasn’t moved, he still leans forward in the chair and the maroon of his eyes are pinpricks of hellfire. They are so close to each other that she can feel his breath on her brow, and she thinks again of last night, of how he had suspended her between his hand and his thigh.

“You are right,” he capitulates. Too easy. “My latest question will have to wait. Now, name your price.”

This is it. This is her chance. Why then is she feeling like she is obligingly sticking her head in a snare?

“Number one: no more drugs. I want a clear head. And I think that maybe you might want me to be of sound mind too. That was not a question,” she adds hastily.

He nods once.

“No more drugs,” he promises, and the ease of his agreement makes her think she was right. He would not have suggested it earlier otherwise. “And your second request?”

She steadies herself. This is crucial. This is an important step towards freedom. She can’t fuck this up, she has to play this right.

“I’ve been cooped up in here for too long. I am used to natural light and fresh air. I am used to running. I am used to keeping myself occupied. At the very least I want out of this room. I want a view. Trees, water. I want some books to read.”

With the way he is coiled, with the smile on his face, she gets the feeling that she’s doing exactly what he wants her to do. *Shit*, she thinks, *shit*, what is he...

“Very well. Though I am sure you realise that you stepping outside this room comes with rules and stipulations attached.”

“Of course,” she says, and wonders exactly in which way she might have played into his wishes.

Hannibal extends his hand.

“How about we discuss them later this evening? Would you like to join us for dinner downstairs, Clarice?”

She takes it.

“I would love to, Dr Lecter.”

Chapter End Notes

A dialogue-heavy chapter, but from here on at least Clarice's playing field will expand.
As will Will and Hannibal's...

high sun

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

She is left alone for long enough that she has time to really *consider* her decision to dine with Dr. Hannibal Lecter. Perhaps, she thinks wryly, she ought to have clarified whether or not she would be *eating* dinner, or *be* dinner.

Of course there was never really a choice but to politely accept the invitation, itself a poor disguise for a tightrope walk on a very slack line. But, she needs to be let out of the room if she is to truly have a chance of escaping. If this means wrestling with the terrible feeling that she is playing straight into Lecter's hands, then so be it.

She gets no further in her fractious musings before there is a knock on the door. That, she thinks, is new; before both Will and Hannibal have entered at will. Now, they must want to emphasise this shift in their relationships. Show her that she has been assigned a new level of agency, however much theatre it is.

"Come in," she calls regardless, and it's Will unlocking the door and stepping through. He's carrying a dress case draped over one arm. When he walks past her on his way to put it down on the chair she can smell snow on him. She can smell cold winds and fir needles and smoke. It clings to him, this smell of winter, clings to his messy hair and plaid shirt.

"You've been outside," she says to him, and it leaves her lips as an accusation, perhaps one far too churlishly delivered. There is, after all, nothing to suggest that her captors should remain indoors out of solidarity to her.

"Hannibal asked me to drop this off," Will answers, ignoring her observation. "He thought you might like something nice to wear for dinner."

"Are you his errand boy?" she asks, both in challenge and in an attempt to gauge the nature of his and Hannibal's...arrangement? Relationship?

Partnership?

The look Will gives her tells her that he knows precisely what it is she is doing. As usual.

"I'm not. But Hannibal is busy getting dinner together."

She looks at him, tries to figure out just how willing he is to indulge Hannibal's...proclivities, without asking outright.

"And how is Hannibal, ah...procuring dinner?"

Will receives her question steadily, solemn, but she sees humour in the corner of his eyes.

“He’s hunting it.”

As her sharp intake of breath he leisurely carries on:

“Saddle of venison, I believe he said.”

She stares at him, disturbed. After a second or two she realises it’s not immediately because of the possibility of eating human meat, but rather the perceived insinuation that Hannibal is hunting the *creature*.

Her companion. Familiar.

It’s completely irrational of course, she knows it just as soon as the thought slowly rises up from her subconscious. She knows that the beast isn’t even real, she *knows* that. And yet...

“I...could he actually...?”

As ever, Will reads her effortlessly, as if she’s but a crudely drawn picture book meant for a young child.

“You think of the stag? It can’t be hurt, Clarice. At least not in *that* way.”

She wants to ask what he means, and why every bit of answer or reassurance he provides only births more questions and fear. But she bites down on it. It doesn’t matter anyway. She will eat the dinner served tonight, regardless of whether it is man or beast laid out on Hannibal’s no doubt expensive serving platters.

“I miss the outdoors,” she says instead, spinning further on the curious habit building between them: that of picking up left-behind strands of conversation and holding them up to the light. Like nothing had come between. She steps a little closer to him, so that she can smell the metallic sharpness of winter again. “I am used to being outside. Used to running. Exercising.”

Will nods.

“Perhaps sometime soon we can go out there,” he says, and she can almost see all the conditions and chains attached to the offer. Worse, she can see herself agreeing to them, can almost *hear* herself agreeing to be *good* just as long as she is allowed fresh air.

“I’d like that,” she nods, pleased with his agreement, but wondering why her triumph feels so soiled, and why she can’t shake the feeling that Will Graham just played her more than she played him.

He heads for the door.

“Dinner at eight.”

“Oh?” she says. “I’m afraid I’m left without a watch. Will you notify me some time before, so that I have time to do my *toilette*?”

There is a twitch by Will's mouth, like he can actually *see* the sarcastic quotation marks she puts around the word, and his eyes crinkle up just so in amusement. She looks at him, and once again is struck by the feeling that she could have really liked him had they met under normal circumstances. Perhaps at Quantico, working a case together. Perhaps in a bar somewhere, standing next to each other and just so happening to strike up conversation.

"I'll knock once so you know it's time to get dressed," is all he says, then leaves.

She's left with nothing to do but investigate Hannibal's offering, and so she unzips the dress case and pulls out the garment within.

It is a column dress, seemingly simple in its execution but a closer inspection reveals severe lines and exquisite tailoring. Long sleeves, high neckline and a low back. The colour is a deep forest green, and while she doesn't have a mirror to confirm, she suspects the hue will complement her skin and offset her hair.

She never would have chosen such a dress for herself, and she is in absolutely no doubt that the fit will be perfect.

Something rattles at the bottom of the dress case, and when she reaches inside she comes out with a jewellery box in blue velvet. With some trepidation she flips it open.

It's a pendant attached to a wide, heavy neck ring. A large, highly polished stone - tiger's eye, she thinks, it's tiger's eye - is set into a disc of brushed, buttery gold. There are some small diamonds too, seemingly scattered at random into the gold around the stone, but she suspects their placement is anything but. This is clearly a very expensive piece, she can tell with the certainty of someone who has always dreamt of fine things.

She weighs it in her hand, slides her finger along the edges of the disc, briefly meditates on its use as a weapon. She disregards the notion as soon as it enters her head; Hannibal Lecter would have already foreseen any such thought on her part.

And anyway, her plan for tonight is to be both a model captive and a *charming* dinner guest.

She throws dress and neckpiece onto the bed, then frets away perhaps an hour or two, jogging in place, doing push-ups and sit-ups and stretches. Trying to expend some nervous energy, glorying in how her head is clearing as the drugs are leaving her system.

Then she takes a quick bath, interrupted by one sharp knock on the door, just as promised by Will.

She dresses, and thinks to look around for shoes. None have been provided, and she supposes she is not surprised. Hannibal Lecter doesn't strike her as a man prepared to leave anything to chance. That notion is further reinforced when she takes a couple of steps in the dress. The skirt of it is so restrictive over hips and thighs that she can walk only very carefully, steps measured and short.

Well, she thinks and brushes her hands down her front to smooth some wrinkles out of the dress, *well*. She will not escape into the snowy winter night in this ensemble, that much is

certain. She has expected nothing less, of course.

She sits in the green chair in her green dress and watches the door, waiting for the announcement that dinner is served.

It is Hannibal coming to fetch her.

Her lips curl when she hears the doors being unlocked from the outside, followed by a polite knock. When nothing more happens she concludes that she is meant to open it herself.

Theatre indeed, she thinks as she crosses the floor. She takes a deep breath, steadies herself best as she can, then she slowly opens the door.

She is not surprised to see Hannibal on the other side of the door. Dinner is, after all, at his instigation, not Will's.

She runs her eyes over him: he's dressed more formally than she's seen him thus far: a plaid three piece suit in what looks like cashmere. Charcoal and red. Blood red. Silk tie, silk pocket square, blinding white shirt and a look in his placid eyes that she is unwilling to identify.

"Good evening, Clarice," he says, inclining his head politely. "The dress suits you. You look wonderful."

His eyes slide down to her throat, and she feels curiously naked as she wonders if he can see how hard her pulse beats.

"As I had hoped," he says. "The tiger's eye pick up the colour of your own eyes, and the highlights of your hair."

With his words her hand goes up to tug at the neck ring, and with the movement she can see how his eyes darken. A collar, she realises, it's like a collar. *God fucking...*

"It's very beautiful," is all she says. "Thank you, Dr Lecter."

He only nods, then offers his arm. She takes it, and for the second time ever steps outside her room.

She's back in the hallway that she ran down just a couple of days ago. She is as barefoot now as then, but that is the only similarity.

It's fully lit up this time, wall sconces between each casement window casting a warm glow over the richly carpeted floor. Hannibal takes her in the opposite direction of that which she ran last time. Then, she sought out the back of the house, now she is being led towards the front.

"I can no longer smell confusion on you," he says, and she jerks underneath his hand.

“Confusion carries a scent?” she asks. “Or, do you mean the dissociative anaesthetic you fed me? Well. Its absence is your doing, is it not, Dr Lecter?”

She bites her lip in regret as soon as she’s spoken the sharp little words, and wonders if she is already failing at her resolution to play nice. But Hannibal only chuckles a little next to her.

“Not at all,” he says as they reach the mezzanine and then the split staircase, “- you yourself negotiated an end to the drugs. It was a fair deal. A good trade.”

She thinks on his words and is compelled to agree. She doesn’t like how much of herself she had to give up in order to reach an agreement, but the results are worth it. She will be so much more effective with a clear mind.

As she begins descending the stairs on Hannibal Lecter’s arm she realises with some surprise that the butterflies in her stomach are not only there to fly in the name of her terror. They are also due to her excitement at finally seeing Will and Hannibal interact. What has passed between them, what is the nature of their relationship?

She knows only what they have separately told her; now she’s got the chance to get a sense of the *whole*. Her precarious situation notwithstanding, this is...this is *exciting*.

Oh, they are not the only ones *curious*; she is too.

They are now down in the hall, quite enormous, flagstone floor chilling her naked feet. There are stained windows, and the ceiling is high, open all the way up to the sturdy old beams far above her. She marvels over how Hannibal has once again managed to land so well on his feet that his new bolthole can be so...grand. Although, she has to concede, it is not as palatial as his Florence residence.

As he leads her across she tries to take measure of the exit. Two large double doors, solid and, well, *loud* looking. But a house this size must have several other exits, she thinks; more inconspicuous ones.

Then she’s distracted by having to enter the dining room again. She takes a deep breath as she steps over the threshold, the memories of what happened when she was last in this room so very vivid and brash. Despite herself she glances out of the large window

It’s empty out there. Just moonlight on snow. No stag.

Will is waiting for them over by a large fireplace that she hadn’t even noticed when she was in here last. It’s lit, a fire dancing merrily within. He is leaning against the mantle, a glass of red held loosely in his hand. He is not dressed as formally as Hannibal, but still appears to have made some effort. Dark pants, crisp white shirt open at the neck, hair swept back.

He greets them with a quick nod and no words, and his eyes, notes Clarice, are fastened on Hannibal’s hand, which now is resting quite casually on her lower back. She can make no sense of Will’s expression, the thoughts behind his clear forehead. Is that how this will be? she wonders. Is she to be used as a chess piece in an indecipherable game between the two men? No rules, no quarter?

But then, Will's eyes when he lifts them to meet Hannibal's are darkly amused, like he's seeing something that tickles him. Perhaps she is the object of this amusement, she thinks sourly. Perhaps Will finds the fact that she has so obviously already grown used to a serial killing cannibal's touch...funny? She herself would certainly think so, had the situation been reversed.

But it is not.

Will steps away from the fireplace and pulls out a chair for her once Hannibal has delivered her to the table. She inclines her head in thanks, and when she is seated she notices for the first time the tableau before her.

It is...preposterous. Vulgar.

Beautiful.

Gluts of gleaming fruits and vivid flowers are creating an ostentatious objet d'art of a centre piece. Hannibal - for it can only be Hannibal - has used a palette of dark reds and blues and purples. Pomegranates, orchids, grapes, calla lilies, plump figs, aubergines and monkshood, all arranged together in a way that aims for casually offhand, but that she can tell is *anything* but.

There are many candles, of course, and a tablecloth of liquid black silk. The air in here is heavy with dark blossoms and smoke and wine, perfumed and lethal.

She tries to relax.

"I must finish things up in the kitchen," says Hannibal with a hand on her shoulder. "Will, will you ensure our guest is refreshed?"

"Of course," replies Will as Hannibal leaves the room through a door at the back. "Wine?"

She hesitates, choosing between the benefits of a clear mind and some liquid courage. Decides.

"White, please."

Will fetches a bottle from a sleek cooler stand in silver at the head of the table. He carries it with a loose grip around the neck, and handles it rather indifferently as he pours her a glass. She gets a look at the label as he places the bottle down in front of her, not bothering to bring it back to the cooler. A Bâtard Montrachet. She smiles a little when she thinks that Hannibal would have treated the bottle much differently and with great respect of its vintage.

Will notices, looks at her as he sits down on the opposite side of the table from her.

"You know the wine?"

"Of course," she says clearly. "It was one of the items on my alert list when I was trying to track you two down." She takes a careful sip. The wine is, of course, exquisite. She can tell

even with her untrained palate. “I was proud of that idea. I’m quite sad someone else had already thought of it.”

Will smiles a little then.

“Ah, yes. Dr Bloom is quite brilliant, and very clever.”

Clarice takes another, very small, sip as she contemplates the confirmation of her suspicion that Alana Bloom had been the one behind Mason Verger’s successful strategy. There are questions about Verger’s involvement, and *Krendler’s*, that she would like answered, but she resolves to focus on Alana Bloom for now.

“Yes. I quite liked her when I spoke to her, although our conversation was brief. It would be a shame if something was to happen to her, wouldn’t it?” she replies, not even trying to hide her insinuation, or her intent. Will had himself said that he was trying to get Hannibal to spare Alana. It can only benefit her to align herself with Will, work against Hannibal.

And protect the innocent in the process.

Will realises. Of course he does.

“Don’t play, Clarice,” he says slowly, looking right at her, so very calm and with eye contact so absolute that it is she who has to avert her gaze. “It could end badly.” He smiles, and it’s like a knife. “Besides which, it is you who currently possess the means to shield Alana, isn’t it? Not me.”

She frowns, spins the slender stem of the wine glass between her fingertips.

“What do you...”

“I’m not much for wine myself,” Will interrupts quite purposefully. “I prefer beer, and whiskey. But Hannibal takes such pleasure in his collection of fine wines that I am loath to insist on alternatives.” Will raises his glass at her. “Besides, he would never interfere with a great vintage. Beer, even whiskey...” He takes a sip. “- could be people.”

Hannibal reappears before Clarice can find an answer to that. He is expertly balancing several plates, moving as smoothly as ever. A crisp linen towel is thrown over his shoulder, matching the white apron he must have put on out in the kitchen.

“Saddle of venison stuffed with prunes and brioche,” he says formally and places a plate in front of her first, then Will. “With haricot verts amandine and soufflés en patates douce.”

She looks down at the meal placed before her. As expected, it looks fantastic. Several-Michelin-stars fantastic. Meat pink and plump, still on the bone. Soufflé perfectly raised, the beans verdantly green. The dark jus artfully framing the various items. Scrumptious. Delicious. Mouth watering.

She really fucking hopes the meat is venison.

Hannibal raises one brow at the Bâtard Montrachet insolently warming on the table, picks it up and moves it back to the ice bucket. Then he removes the apron and the kitchen towel, fussily opens the crisp napkin by his place setting, and sits down.

He's at the head of the table, her and Will on either side of him.

Ah.

"Please," says Hannibal and picks up his silverware. "Tuck in. Bon appetit."

Will nods and starts eating, silent, his manner easy and relaxed. She wonders if it is often like this, that the two men eat and coexist in comfortable quietude.

Hannibal interrupts her reverie.

"We ought to discuss the parameters of your stay here," he says as he cuts into his meat.

"Of course" she says politely, and runs a finger around the rim of her wine glass. The fine crystal emits a soft humming noise, and she leans against the smoothness of the sound. It's nothing tangible, but she needs whatever equilibrium she can get.

What depressing ways of self-soothing she is developing, she thinks bleakly.

"You may leave your room during the day," says Hannibal as he carefully gathers a piece of meat, some soufflé and a lick of jus on his fork. "But you are allowed to move freely only on the second and the third floor."

She hadn't even realised there *was* a third floor.

"Down here," Hannibal continues, "- you may only come for meals and for conversations with me. Or if accompanied by either one of us."

Makes sense, she thinks. All the exits are down here. And the kitchen knives. The meat hooks.

"I understand," is all she says.

"And I must warn you, Clarice, that the consequences if you break these simple rules will be...unpalatable."

He looks quite friendly when he says it, but his eyes are blank and infernal, the shadows the candles cast seem to paint demonic shadows across his cheekbones. She believes him. Oh, does she believe him.

"Yes, Dr Lecter."

"Wonderful!" he says with quite some cheer, and brings the delicately assembled parcel of food to his mouth.

She begins eating too. The food is sensational, of course it's fucking sensational. It's all she can do not to groan as she chews, half starved as she is from her brief little hunger strike.

In order not to eat too fast she endeavours to make conversation.

"So tell me," she says demurely, "what became of the owner of this lovely house?" She leans forward and lowers her voice in a faux-confidential manner. "Did you stash them in the basement?"

Oh, she thinks. Perhaps she is still somewhat lightheaded, perhaps her tongue isn't yet quite her own.

Or perhaps it is *too* much her own.

Will's mouth twitches, like he might even laugh, but Hannibal is quite unmoved. He gives her the kind of look a teacher might give an unruly charge as he answers.

"I own this house. I have for many years, albeit under an assumed name. Early on I foresaw the need for an easily accessed, highly secluded..alternative address."

She is displeased with the "secluded" part.

"You seem to have a few of them," she replies, remembering his house on the bluff. "Are we still in the States?"

"I believe you will have to earn the answer to that, Clarice."

"Of course, Dr. Lecter," she says and pops a bean into her mouth.

They finish the main meal, and Hannibal serves up dessert

("Canelés de Bordeaux with crème Chantilly. A favourite of mine")

with coffee. She might be clearer of head, but she is also completely exhausted, and she tunes out Will and Hannibal's conversation, too sleepy to analyse it. She suspects she will get more chances.

She hopes she will.

"A night cap in the drawing room?" suggests Hannibal as they have finished their dessert.

"I'd love to," she answers, eyes creasing too hard; too obvious. But Hannibal smiles a little, and Will gives a solemn nod.

On their way they pass a door, plain and inconspicuous. But she can hear insistent scratching and whimpering behind it, and she spins, looks at Will and Hannibal with a hand on her throat.

Will looks openly amused at her terror, her blatant supposition, and it is Hannibal moving to calm her.

“Will’s dogs,” he explains, voice sounding a tad dry. “They are kept in the mud room during meals. They are...somewhat uncouth.”

“You managed to bring your dogs here?” she asks Will, rather dumbfounded at this feat.

“No. That would have been impossible,” he says, and she sees genuine regret in the lines of his face. “These are some strays I found in... Well. Nearby.”

The scratching continues behind the door, and now she can clearly hear that it is dogs whining and yipping. A mud room, Hannibal had said.

“Can I see them?” she asks.

“Sure,” says Will, and opens the door. The dogs come running out.

There are three of them, and their only common denominator is that they are, to a one, incredibly ugly. Shaggy and uneven, short-legged here, long-legged there, lolling tongues and droopy eyes, scraggly tails. Big and small, and Clarice can’t even begin to guess what different breeds live in these creatures.

But they all tie themselves in knots to greet her, their entire bodies wagging along with their tails, all cheerful faces and genuine delight.

Without hesitation Clarice sits down on the floor, right among them, and despite the hint of a tick on Hannibal’s face she allows them to climb on her and slobber all over her dress. She scratches ears and backs and buries her face in fur, treasures the warm bodies pressing against her. Until now she hadn’t realised how much she had missed close contact, warmth. She’s been feeling cold and isolated and terrified for so long that being surrounded by the unconditional warmth of these, ah, homely-looking mutts feels like something incredible, life affirming...

...necessary.

She happens to glance up at Will, and is struck by the look on his face. It is... *calculating*.

It bothers her, but she buries her face in the fur of the closest dog and resolves not to second guess,

She is so wrapped up in this fleeting moment of normalcy that she’s almost forgotten the biggest reason she asked to meet the dogs. While cooing over them she swiftly takes stock.

The mud room is bigger than her entire bedroom back home. It is tiled, and there are comfortable-looking dog baskets along one wall. There are food and water bowls, and, most importantly, a door. Next to the door hangs waxed coats, parkas, waders. On the floor rubber boots and hiking shoes and sneakers.

She feels sure Will comes in and out of here all the time. Maybe Hannibal too, but not as much. This is Will’s thoroughfare.

She makes very sure they can't see her looking. Instead she concentrates on the dogs. Rubs their sides, their ears, allows them to lick her face. Giggles at their delight, and hers.

"Can I see them again?" she asks Will.

"Of course," he replies.

"It's late, Clarice, and I can see that you are tired," says Hannibal, and helps her to her feet.

"Come. Let's skip the night cap and get you to bed instead."

Chapter End Notes

Ok full disclosure: this chapter was meant to have a lot more happen, but alas: the word count ran away with me. Also, more importantly, what was meant to be the last part of chapter 7 (and will now be part of chapter 8 instead) is very hard to write and get right. I feel I have to weigh every single word ridiculously carefully, and it's taking bloody ages. And so I thought you, lovely people reading along, would rather have a shorter chapter 7 now than wait another month or two for a longer version. A lot of what will make up the next chapter is already written, and as soon as I have updated my other fic *Dimmuborgir* I will come back to *Typhoid* and *Swans* and work to get chapter 8 up.

I really hope you enjoyed this chapter regardless.

afternoon light

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter 8: afternoon light

With the drugs out of her system her own dreams return to her. The shrill fear of lambs and horses. Victims she was unable to save. Babies starved to death in their cots, young women with their skin taken from them.

Her father.

It all comes back.

She sleeps just as badly now as she did under the influence of ketamine, she thinks, rubbing her eyes as she sits in far too-comfortable a chair in the drawing room.

Hannibal is sitting in the chair opposite, again close enough that their knees may touch. He is ostensibly taking notes, his face half-hidden behind a large notepad, the sound of the pen soft and grating against the paper.

She drifts, tired, mind peculiar and limber halfway outside of her body. Hannibal's silence is no longer the annoyance it was earlier, rather it is beginning to approach something peaceful, the scratch of his pen becoming her only thread back to herself. Her head is leaning back on the headrest, and slowly she rolls it to the side, taking in the room through half-lidded eyes.

She has seen photos of Hannibal's office back in Baltimore. This space is entirely different in appearance, yet almost the same in feel. The very tall windows. The chairs facing each other. The ostentatious desk. The books and the papers. The shadows and the lights, and Hannibal directing them as he pleases.

She looks back at the large man opposite her, but he's still preoccupied with his notepad, though she hardly thinks he's keeping a journal on her. She's not his patient, she's not in therapy.

She's not.

Without his attention she drifts again, and considers these past few days.

As agreed, she is allowed free rein of parts of the second and third floor during the day, and she is careful to thread softly within the restraints of her freedom. She never as much as glances down the stairs at the front doors. She will sometimes look out of the windows

though, and all she can see is snow and nothing. A few times she has looked out of them just after dusk, straining her eyes for artificial lights in the distance. Cars, buildings, streetlights.

There is nothing. They really do appear to be as secluded as Hannibal had claimed.

She is allowed down the stairs to the ground floor for meals, and for her conversations with Hannibal in the drawing room.

Hannibal and Will are careful to give little away during the former, and she returns the favour during the latter. So far it has been cautious and polite conversations, tiptoeing gently across beautiful minefields and hoping she might keep her limbs and her mind. She yearns to know more about the two men though, and Hannibal in turn seems determined to break through her epidermis and burrow inside her veins. She wonders how far he will go to know her.

Will...Will is inscrutable but something like kind, and it drives her insane how she slides down the smooth facade of him, finding no purchase anywhere.

At night she is locked in, but it's not as claustrophobic as before, now that she knows that she will be let out come morning. And when she has things with which to occupy herself in her isolation.

Because on the third floor, up in the rafters and next to what she learns is Will's bedroom, she has found a little study, a nook. It is full of books and magazines and squishy chairs, dark woods and a little woodburner. Will can often be found in here, with the three dogs by his feet as he reads or ties lures. The lures are for spring, he explains to her, for when the river just beyond here comes unfrozen and he can fish. She is welcome here, he says, and she can take books back to her room as well. And she does. But she likes sitting in the nook too, sometimes on her own, sometimes with Will. They don't talk so much, but she listens for his breaths, falls into rhythm with them, holds on to them, could almost feel like she...

"Clarice? Clarice."

She blinks. Hannibal has put his pad down, is leaning forward in his chair and he's stroking her cheek with two fingers. When she meets his eyes he smiles, just a little.

"There you are. You drifted off." His fingers remain on her face, and he is close, so very very close. She can feel his breath on her forehead, and she is faintly surprised that it's warm, not cold. She's got nowhere to go, trapped between him and the chair, and so she stays as still as she can. Tries to meet his eyes, because he wouldn't like it if she didn't.

"You were almost asleep."

"I apologise," she says, rubbing her bare feet against the thick rug. "I'm very tired."

"You don't sleep well?"

She wants to sit up straighter but he's so near and he's still touching her, and if she moves now she'll get closer to him still, and she doesn't know what...how...

"I had assumed you would rest easier free of the narcotics."

“Well,” she murmurs, quite careless, “- drugged nightmares give way to familiar old nightmares, I guess.”

He pounces immediately, of course, the whiff of trauma must be as thick and delicious as blood in his nostrils. He sits back up, gives her back her space, but she can feel no relief when the look in his eyes is so incredibly *hungry*.

“You have suffered from bad dreams for a while?”

“Yes,” she says, and then, in an attempt to give nothing away for free, reminds him of their tit-for-tat deal: “Where are we?”

He doesn’t need to be reminded. He answers promptly.

“Canada. Far north.”

And that, she thinks wryly, explains the stark contrast between the seasons. No wonder they are held in winter here, while it had almost been spring in New York when they took her.

“I suppose you can be no more specific?”

North Canada is vast. Too vast. Though how clever of him to keep a bolt hole here.

“Tell me about your nightmares,” is his answer.

But she can’t. Not even for vital information. He will have to sink his teeth into something else instead. And she is, she thinks bleakly, very confident of his ability to do so.

“Ask me something else,” she says.

The slow blink of his eyes and the deliberate way he holds himself tells her that he will not forget this. He has unearthed something delicious, something nourishing, more nourishing even that meat, and he will not rest until it is his. Until he has stripped her off it, taken it from her bones and skin and mind.

But for now, he indulges her.

“Very well. Then tell me, Clarice, how does it feel to be rejected and thrown out by the very institution to which you have devoted your life?”

A change of topic so sudden it hurts, and a subject no less charged. Ouch, she thinks. A low blow: Hannibal Lecter can be petty. But then she had already guessed that. And of course, Abigail Hobbs knew of it intimately, not least in the split second before he slit her throat.

“How can you know it rejected me?”

She knows it’s cheating, answering a question with a question, but with an impatient raise of one eyebrow he allows it.

“Will did some due diligence once you began stirring things up in Florence. Your presence there was not sanctioned by the FBI. Rather you had struck out on your own. By all accounts you were a good agent, and your career was once thought to become stellar. But it stalled. What happened, Clarice?”

She doesn't miss his use of past tense. She wonders if it is his way of punishing her for evading him. Still, she finds that it is easy to answer. Too easy. The words flowing over her lips like smooth and clear water. Perhaps she needs this, she reflects as from afar, needs to spew out all out: the hurt and the frustration and the fucking searing *unfairness* of it all.

“A man with power happened, of course. A Justice Department official. Me breaking the Buffalo Bill case back when I was a trainee stuck in his craw.”

She takes a breath, leans back in the chair. She's angry, and there is no way she can hold that close to herself. She remembers the very first time she met Paul Krendler, in Catherine Martin's apartment in Memphis. How could she have known then how much she would come to hate him, and the extent he would ruin her?

“He might have forgiven me that. Overlooked it. But then, Dr Lecter, I committed the most cardinal of sins.”

“Which was?” asks Lecter, and looks like he's not wondering at all.

“I turned down his advances. Told him to go home to his wife instead. After that he was hellbent on ending me.” *And then Jack died*, she doesn't say, but the pain of it is almost verbal. She leans forward again, very briefly feeling fearless in the face of the injustice she has suffered. “Can you believe it really is that simple, Dr. Lecter?”

“So,” he says, not missing a beat, “- how does it feel to be rejected and thrown out by the very institution to which you have devoted your life?”

She huffs out a laugh. Well. She *hopes* it comes out as a laugh.

“It feels like betrayal,” she answers easily enough, and she finds she doesn't have to consider it. “I did give the FBI my all. I am a damn good agent,” the quirk of his eyebrow tells her that he doesn't miss her use of present tense, “- but not as good with the political side of it. Which is fine. What is not fine is that I was set up to fail because of only one thing: I refused to fuck a superior.”

He looks like her crudeness is amusing to him, and he looks at her like she's a banquet spread out before him.

“What is his name, Clarice?”

“Paul Krendler,” she answers without even an ounce of hesitation. In fact, it feels good to spit his name out, it feels good to symbolically hand it gift-wrapped to one of the most vicious killers ever to exist. It feels a little, just a little, like...

Release.

Well, she thinks sourly, tis a pity Dr. Hannibal Lecter is too busy being a cannibal to properly be a therapist. She also thinks that she just gave him far too much. She hadn't meant to do that. She is left with the uncomfortable notion that Lecter is now halfway wedged into her temporal lobe. Was he ever found to have consumed brain? she wonders half nonsensically, half hysterically.

"Are they looking for me?" she asks. There is something forlorn about how it comes out; not how she had meant it. By the way his nostrils flare he picks it up.

"Of course they are. They are nowhere near finding you. And they won't. You will become yet another I've *devoured*."

His emphasis on the last word makes her run cold, then hot. It's a threat, and it's...something else. And how strange, she thinks, that his knees against hers now have become a mooring, something tying her to a craggy, dangerous coastline.

She feels like now is the time to end this session, but she must achieve something first. She has given a lot, and received barely anything in return, unless one wanted to count the spurious sense of satisfaction found in setting into words the injustice she'd suffered at the hands of the FBI.

And she doesn't, she doesn't count that. Nothing tangible will come from it.

And she wants something tangible. Real.

With some awkward shuffling, since Hannibal isn't giving an inch, she stands from the chair. She needs movement for this, and she needs distance.

"I want my boon," she says when she's halfway across the room.

It had struck her in the middle of the night, what Will might have meant with what he said during their first dinner together.

"I think I've been very accommodating, Dr Lecter. I've given you a lot today. Quid pro quo."

He has stayed in his chair but has turned in it to follow her movement, his eyes heavy on her, his attention rapt.

"Then name it, Clarice."

She takes a deep breath, but doesn't allow herself to hesitate. He would sense it, and pounce.

"Alana Bloom," she says and stills her pacing, stands facing him with her chin held high. "I want you to leave her alone. I don't want you *collecting*."

She's starting to be able to read the infinitesimal ticks on his placid face, and she thinks that she has maybe annoyed him. Definitely surprised him.

"You don't even know her," he says slowly. "Why would you waste this on someone you don't know?"

It's easy for her to answer.

"She's an innocent."

Hannibal stands from the chair in one smooth movement, and she starts pacing again, all the better to be on the move, on her toes, should he lash out at her.

"And you a self-proclaimed defender of the innocent and downtrodden, yes, I remember." His voice is bone dry. "Well, let me assure you of this: Alana Bloom is hardly an innocent. Far from it. She elected to play the game. She lost."

"That's not how I heard it."

Hannibal walks up to her then, and it discombobulates her. One second he's over there by the chair, the next he is in front of her. She tries to sidestep, create space, but he cups her cheek, holds her in place with only a light touch. His hand is very warm. She thinks of how he nuzzled her hair as he choked her in the dining room.

"You speak of goodness, Clarice. You want to be *good*. It permeates everything you do, doesn't it? All your decisions, your reason, your drive. Goodness. Tell me Clarice, do you believe in God?"

"I do not," she whispers, dizzy with how close he is, how dangerous. "Do you?"

"God is a fascinating concept. A more elegant killer than I could ever hope to be."

"Elegant?"

"Of course. God kills that way. Elegance, Clarice, is always important."

"For you?" she murmurs "- when you kill?"

"Always," he replies, voice almost as quiet as hers, but strong and sure. His eyes are darkened as he stands there and gently holds her still. She wonders if he fantasises about killing her elegantly, for having the temerity to use their deal in this way.

"Alana Bloom," she prompts.

Hannibal smiles at her then, and she's never seen his eyes look so expressive. Aflame. He strokes a thumb across her lower lip, presses down ever so gently but firmly, making her wonder if he means to slip inside her mouth.

"Very well," he murmurs, his breath brushing her brow, her forehead. "Alana's life is yours, Clarice. Caretake it wisely," and he steps even closer, the heat from his body quite infernal, "- because you won't get another op..."

"Hannibal?"

They both turn towards the door. Will has it open a crack, looking in at them.

“Mind if I borrow Clarice?”

The deliberate omission of a reason to do so is glaring, and Hannibal and Will have a silent conversation so loud she can almost hear it. She fancies she can see the words in the air above her head, dark and bewinged, and she wishes she could reach out and catch them. Hold them tight in her hand, study them and perhaps understand something of the relationship between the two men. Then Hannibal takes a step back, the warmth of him diminishing, and she can draw a proper breath again.

“Of course,” he says politely, and inclines his head.

“Thank you, Dr. Lecter,” she tells him. “As always I’ve enjoyed our conversation.”

She can be polite too. She has to be.

“Dinner at eight, as usual,” Hannibal reminds her.

“I look forward to it.”

She leaves his side, walks towards the door and Will. When she’s reached him, is about to slip out through the crack, Hannibal calls out to her.

“Clarice?”

She looks back over her shoulder.

“Yes, Dr Lecter?”

“Until our next conversation here I would like you to consider something.”

“And what is that?” she asks, but she can already feel tension spiraling up her spine. She took him by surprise with her little Alana Bloom stunt, maybe even briefly one-upped him, and now he will find a way to make her pay him back.

“Your greatest fear. I would like to know what it is. Think about it, please.”

She can feel her shoulders going up, can feel cold sweat kissing the back of her neck. But she nods at him. It figures that he would up the ante, demand more. She shouldn’t be surprised.

She takes her leave with Will, and she doesn’t say anything until they’re up on the second floor.

“Were you listening in?”

“Yes,” says Will. “I don’t do it habitually. But I did today.”

“And so you saved me. Very kind.”

He says nothing to that, doesn’t confirm or deny that a rescue from Hannibal’s machinations was his intention.

She stops outside of her room, not sure if she should go inside or not, unwilling to turn her cell into a refuge. In a sort of uneasy compromise she leans against the wall next to the door, and Will stands before her, an eyebrow raised, waiting for her to speak.

“How much did you hear?”

“Enough,” says Will slowly. “I heard about Krendler. I’m sorry that happened to you. Sorry, not surprised.”

He looks sincere, but sometimes she thinks it’s harder to read Will than Hannibal.

“It’s hardly strange that you decided to come after us,” he continues. “With Jack gone you really don’t have much left, do you?”

He makes it sound like she decided to find them for reasons other than to catch them and drag them back to a secure cell each.

“And you took me with open arms,” she says bitterly.

“You are alive,” says Will softly.

“But why?”

“Who can say?”

She suspects *he* can. She suspects that he knows very fucking well why she is alive, why they are standing here having a conversation. But she can hardly force it out of him.

She changes tack a little, looks at him steadily and decides to put his cards on the table.

“I did as you wanted, Will. I saved Alana Bloom.”

“As I wanted?” he repeats

“Of course,” she says. “You meant for me to use my arrangement with Hannibal to call him off her, didn’t you? And so I did, and your little plot worked. You must be pleased.”

Will leans against the wall next to her, and steeples his fingers under his chin. She has already identified that as his way to keep from twitching. She turns her head sideways to keep looking at him. His breaths are slow and even, and despite herself she once again finds herself leaning against them, falling into them. His eyes are inscrutable as he studies her, and here comes that singular feeling of danger and calm.

How is she ever meant to make sense of a paradox like that?

“Alana doesn’t deserve to die,” he eventually says.

She shakes her head, finds herself moving closer to him, just a little, her cashmere top sliding smoothly on the wooden wall behind them.

“Are you trying to *temper* Hannibal, Will?”

“I do not want to change him,” he says in an answer that is not. Or perhaps it *is*. “When I decided to go with him, join him, I did so with my eyes wide open.”

“But sometimes, when he wants to do something you don’t agree with, you use whatever means available to you to attempt to change his direction?”

“Something like that,” agrees Will.

“And so I am a tool,” she says flatly. Inexplicably sad. Strangely disappointed.

“I mean for you to be more than that,” says Will quietly, so quiet she can barely hear it. Barely a whisper. In fact, she finds herself sliding closer to him still, so that she can pick up all his nuances, so that she may catch all the things he doesn’t really say in her cupped hands.

That’s how she gets within touching distance, and slowly, so as to not spook her, Will reaches out. She doesn’t pull back. She stays absolutely still and watches how his hand comes closer and closer to her face.

He doesn’t touch her. Not directly. He gently picks up a lock of her long hair between two fingers, and seems to study the way the light from the sconce above them reflects off of the strands. There is curiosity and darkness and want slipping and sliding through the shadows of his face, there is something like...like...

She can barely breathe.

Hannibal may have helped himself to all of her space, but up until now Will has kept a careful distance. In fact, she thinks bitterly, he has encouraged her to come to *him*. She has seen right through it, she even *told* him that she sees right through it, and yet...

...and yet she stands there and lets him wind her hair about his finger. He’s making no more move towards her, stays calmly where he is, quiet, dark. But she, she can feel herself gravitate into him, even if they do not touch. Breathe as he breathes, feel as he feels. Let him do the same to her. Feel her, know her, read her.

See her.

Is it really this easy, she thinks? Is *she* really this easy?

She opens her mouth to speak - plead? - but then closes it again.

No. *No*.

She pulls free, abruptly, jerkily. Opens the door and slips into her room, slams it shut behind her. Leans back against it and tries to gather all the pieces of herself back together again. She can hear Will’s footsteps moving away, towards the third floor, and she sinks down on the floor.

Guess this cell really is becoming my refuge, she thinks.

It's almost eight.

She sneaks down the stairs among the little pack of dogs, lets the tap of claws against the flagstones and the happy panting of lolling tongues mask the soft pads of her bare feet.

Hannibal is in the kitchen putting the final touches to the dinner, she knows. If she strains her ears she can hear the faint sounds of pans being moved about, accompanied by opera. She's got no idea where Will is, but she thinks he's somewhere upstairs, tying his lures, waiting for spring to give life to the river.

If she is caught now, here, she can always say that she is down early for dinner. She might struggle to explain why she is dressed in every single piece of cashmere and silk loungewear at her disposal, rather than one of the many evening dresses gifted her by Hannibal, but she could conceivably get away with it.

If she keeps going though, if she is found anywhere but right at the foot of the stairs or in the dining room...then she might well find out precisely what Hannibal means with "unpalatable".

She hurries quietly across the hallway floor, dogs running happily alongside her, covering any noise her bare feet might make. With the greatest care, and agonisingly slowly, she pulls open the door to the mudroom.

It's empty, and it looks precisely as it did the last time she saw it. The dogs move past her into the room, inspect their food bowls, drink some water, then by force of habit seek out their baskets.

She listens back into the house. Nothing. All quiet, all peaceful. Forcing herself to move softly and casually she closes the door behind herself. The dogs are settled now, curled nose to tail in their baskets, uncaring of what she is doing. She hurries over to the coat rack and wraps herself in the thickest parka she can find - it smells like Will, she thinks, like winter and deep thoughts - and pulls the hood up over her head. Then she pulls on the fur-lined boots, far too big for her but they will have to do, with her lacing them up as tightly as she can.

Then she opens the heavy door to the outside.

The violently fresh air takes her breath away. The snow and wind, as she had thought, whips cruelly into the darkness. It will make things very difficult for her, she thinks, but it will make things very difficult for her captors too.

She hesitates. She had wanted to do this better. Plan it meticulously, be trusted enough around the house that she could have gathered provisions and more suitable clothes in preparation.

Trusted enough to be let outside so that she could at least have assessed the immediate surroundings. But after today....

...today felt like a breaking point. With both Hannibal and Will, in differing ways. Different threats, different temptations. If she stays beyond today she fears for her sanity, for...for herself. Who she *is*. Her identity.

Clarice Starling. FBI agent.

It's all she's ever worked for. She is not sure she could survive being deconstructed, taken apart and then put back together again. Not sure she could....

She takes a deep breath. Tamps down the dark, sharp feeling that this, escaping, is just...too easy.

Then she slips outside and runs away into the snow.

Chapter End Notes

I am really looking forward to writing the next chapter.

hinterland

Chapter 9: hinterland

She realises pretty much immediately that she has made an enormous mistake.

Well, she corrects herself, she had known that even before she opened that door and ran out into the night.

But what, then, would be the alternative? Stay? Stay, and not even try *at all*?

No, she determines as she lowers her head against the coldly burning pain of whipping snow and struggles onward, that is not an option. That is not *her*.

Everything is white and black, there is nothing in between. Night and snow, and no light to shoot through it all, nothing to make sense of the sheer, impossible *violence* of the storm. The wind seems to come from several directions at once, taking the snow in wild swirls and swoops with a single minded ferocity she's never seen before. It screams and howls and traces chaos theory through the air. She's never seen such elemental fury; almost like a sentient being, a demi-god of winter, is trying to bury her alive.

She knows winter. She knows winter in the West Virginian mountains, she knows winter in Montana. None of those iterations of the season can quite compare to this cruel, Arctic one. She is forced to admit that she has greatly underestimated the sheer lethality of a truly northern winter.

Not to mention that she'd gravely overestimated her own ability to face it.

She's miscalculated a lot of things, it seems.

Certainly she had underestimated Hannibal's wish for freedom and overestimated his need for finery and fripperies. She had thought him unable to exist far from civilisation, had thought that he would never head into the wilderness to hide. She hadn't really believed him when he told her they were far north. She had assumed that, if they were indeed in Canada, he would have placed himself somewhere near Montreal or Quebec City, somewhere within relatively easy reach of New York City.

She had also, she thinks, underestimated the influence of Will Graham.

Because this is Will's landscape. Will's world. Desolate wilderness, hinterland. She can't really say she knows Will Graham, but even so she knows that he would be comfortable here, thrive here.

And there is always fucking mail order.

Her thoughts are rambling, she thinks, to distract from her situation. She stops, briefly, and looks around.

It doesn't do her any good.

She lost her sense of direction almost immediately, closely followed by her sense of time. She has been trudging in what she hopes is a straight line, leaning into the wind when she's not being hit by it, and she is faintly surprised at how quickly despair has set in. But how could it not, walking as she is in a frozen purgatory?

She cried earlier, but she stopped when she realised that the tears immediately froze to ice on her cheeks. Now they are steaks of frost holding her face still, and she's unwilling to expend the effort required to raise her hand to wipe them away. If she even could.

No, she doesn't think she could; her hands are as frozen as her face. The too-long sleeves of the parka she stole have proven insufficient to keep her hands warm, and her only comfort is that they hurt like a sonofabitch. At least that means she's not yet suffering from frostbite. They are doing better than her bare feet. The first snowdrift she had to wade through saw lots of snow welling into the too-big boots, and she has lost all sensation in her toes.

"Ok, Clarice," she whispers to herself, "- this was really fucking stupid."

The words get blown away by the wind, though and it's like they were never even there at all.

She is having to face that she will probably die. That Hannibal hadn't lied when he told her that they are in the middle of nowhere, lost somewhere in the vast, frozen north. It could be hours to the closest house. Village. Town. And she doesn't have hours. She probably does not even have *one* hour. It hurts to blink, to keep her eyes open, because her eyelashes are frozen to ice. Her mind is getting foggy, and she is getting more and more unwilling to fight. How easy it would be, she thinks, to simply sink down in the snow and rest. Succumb to the cold, and drift away. At least she hadn't ended up as fucking pot roast. At least there is *that*.

She almost stumbles straight into the stag.

It stands with its side towards her, against the wind, but she doesn't see it until she is right upon it. She stops, looks at it, and thinks she's hallucinating. Somewhere, far off, she *knows* she is hallucinating, of course, that the creature has never been real. But even more so now. She thinks she's delusional, that she is about to die; that she is seeing things because she is closer to death than she is life.

But it looks so very *solid*. It looks like it is here, right in front of her. In fact, the wind is no longer quite so cruel, because the stag absorbs some of its force with its massive body. She can see the breath billowing from its nostrils, she can see herself reflected in its pitch black

eyes, she can feel the heat emanating from its hide. Smell it, too: musk and deep woods and snow. She's about to warm her frozen hands on its steaming flank when it starts moving, starts walking into the snow with its head low against the force of it, so low its antlers about touch the ground.

She doesn't hesitate. Not even for a second.

She follows it.

They walk not quite side by side for a while, and for the briefest time she feels... almost safe. Safe with the stag. Like things will be alright. Like she isn't walking on the thinnest line between life and death. Like she hasn't taken an impossible decision to escape an impossible situation.

Then she falls forward, goes down on one knee. It takes her a while to get back up again, and when she does the stag isn't there anymore, it has disappeared just like that. Away into the snow like it was never really there.

Then Will Graham emerges out of all the white.

She doesn't try to run. She is too frozen, too numb, too worn. She just stands there and watches him get closer to her.

He is dressed entirely appropriately for the weather. Down parka, snow pants, hat, gloves, a scarf covering the lower half of his face. Snow boots. He looks like he belongs here, like navigating and traversing this snowy hellscape is entirely without consequence for him.

Winter, she thinks half hysterically, seems to embrace him.

Just as she had thought.

He stops a couple of feet away. He doesn't grab for her, or gets in her space. He just pulls down the scarf from over his mouth so that she may better hear him.

"There is a little chalet not far from here," he shouts at her over the wind. "We would need to take cover there."

Then he holds his hand out to her.

She stares at it, his hand, and her exhausted mind is reeling, twisting and spinning. He is giving her a choice. He is giving her a *fucking choice*. It is non-verbal, but she hears it loud and clear: *Take my hand, or take your chances*.

Those chances are pretty certain to end in death by hypothermia, but he is offering it up to her. It's her decision; she believes the look in his eyes which tells her that he would allow her to turn around and let winter swallow her down, should she choose to do so.

That fucking bastard.

She is so tired as to be near unconscious, but still she manages to summon up some fury over his methods. Making her *choose* to come to him, to go back to captivity.

She hesitates.

And it feels like something cracks inside her, her thoughts slipping through darkness and light like skittish animals; boundless, trapped. It's a big crack, she feels, something like a fault line; irreparable, irreversible, she will never be the same again. Her soul hanging loose, swinging in the wind, her mind worn so threadbare as to be almost transparent.

She *hates* that. How can she *ever* come back from this, how can she...

...she steps forward, and she takes his hand.

He clasps it in his, and pulls her close to him.

"It's a little ways away. Do you think you can walk by yourself?"

She doesn't even have the energy to speak. She just nods in affirmation, even though she thinks that might be a lie.

Because she's got no strength left at all. She has no idea how she is meant to walk to this chalet of his, no idea at all. But she must try. She allows him to slip his arm about her waist and then they turn into the storm together.

It doesn't go so well. Even though she's upright, on her own two feet, she slips in and out of consciousness. A second here, a second there; a recurring fugue state she can't control. Her sense of place is disjointed and fluid; one second she's in front of a massive pine, the next she's left it long behind. She moves like an apparition caught in static, in fretful fits and starts. And *time*, she loses time everywhere, sweet little beads of memories and awareness slipping between her fingers and scattering all about the frozen ground.

She's as weak as a newborn.

"Will," she slurs. "*Will*. I don't think I can...I can't go on...I can't."

His arm tightens about her waist.

"Yes, you can," he says, turning his mouth into her temple and pressing the words and his will straight into her head. "Do you really think I will allow anything else? You will walk, Clarice, and you will walk straight."

She nods, lowers her head, and determines not to try and cry again.

Still, by the time they reach the chalet, he is mostly carrying her.

It's a squat, simple little building. More of a cabin, really. It's dark of window, thick with an atmosphere of desolation. It stands among a cove of pines, seeming to use the trees as support in staying upright in the storm.

She can barely climb the few steps up to the simple porch, but Will gets her up it somehow. He finds the key tucked above the lintel, unlocks, and ushers her inside.

She gets a hazy sense of rough hewn wooden walls, simple furniture, stale air.

“This has not been in use since before Hannibal and I came here. I hope the electricity still works.”

He leaves her standing in the middle of the room, and she sinks onto the floor as he moves about the place, trying the switches.

The light comes on, flickering and uncertain. More off than on. It seems inevitable that before long it will give up entirely.

“The storm doesn’t help matters,” murmurs Will.

In the brief, startling bursts of light she tries to take in the place as she sits on the floor, curiously apart from herself.

From what she can tell it’s a one room cabin. There is a kitchenette along one wall, a bed against the opposite one. A table and two chairs underneath the only window, an old wood burner just along. She sees Will flickering in and out of illumination as he picks up one of the chairs and smashes it to pieces against the wall, then stuffs the splintered wood into the burner. She watches him expertly light a fire, but it’s a distant, indifferent sort of observation, far removed.

She is drifting away from herself. She can feel it, but she doesn’t care. It’s nice. It’s nice not to feel anything anymore, nice not to care. Nice to just let it *happen*.

As from afar she sees Will pull the mattress and all the bedding from the bed and drag it to the floor in front of the wood burner. Then, just as the light finally gives out and leaves the room in nothing but faint firelight, he crouches down in front of her, tips her face up towards him with a finger under her chin.

He doesn’t say anything about what he sees in her eyes, just immediately starts ripping her clothes off.

That jostles her back to herself.

“What are you...”

“Hypothermia,” he says shortly. “You will die. You need body heat.”

He strips her down to her underwear, and then himself, and she doesn’t stop him. She can’t, shivering in place on the floor, unresisting when he moves her onto the mattress and pulls her back into himself, her back to his front. He sweeps all the blankets around them both, then wraps his arms around her.

She wants to sit stiffly but doesn’t have the energy for it, simply sinks back into him. He’s so very warm against her back, around her, and his breaths are so familiar. Safe, even though she

knows that *he* isn't. She drifts again, but follows his breaths, like she has done before. It feels so good to leave herself behind like this, to...

"I know you want to sleep, Clarice," says Will in her ear, "- but I can't let you. You need to stay awake for a while yet. Until I know you will be fine. Talk to me."

She must be warming up a little bit at least, she thinks, because she notices her frozen tears thaw and run freely down her face in a frigid echo of crying.

She's so *close* to him. That awful intimacy of skin on skin She can't bear it. She wants to get closer. She wants to get away.

"How did you find me?"

She can barely get the words out, can't wrap her lips around them properly, but Will understands her well enough.

"I know the area very well. The grounds to this house are very vast, and you had made good tracks. You were almost at the border of the property." He pauses for a second. "Of course, you were on your way back towards the house when I found you. That made it easier."

"I followed the st..."

She cuts herself off as she tries to wrap her mind around the implications, as she realises what it might mean. Is it reasonable, she thinks dully, to feel betrayed by an apparition?

She decides to focus on something other than a familiar that might not be, after all, *hers*.

"You came alone."

He moves a little behind her. She can feel his heart beat solidly against her spine, his thighs cradling her body.

"Hannibal wanted to be the one to fetch you back, but I wouldn't let him. I convinced him I should go."

"Were you afraid he would kill me if he came instead?" she asks plainly.

He doesn't answer, simply brings her closer, and she, she turns her head and inhales him, her nose as the base of his neck. His mouth is in her hair, and she doesn't hear what he says at first.

"What was that?" she murmurs.

"I watched you go."

"What?" she whispers.

"I knew you would try it, of course. So did Hannibal. I took care to keep an eye on you, because I wanted to see your face the second you took the leap. And I did, and it was

fascinating.” He looks down on her then, meets her eyes squarely. “I saw determination, of course. But I saw hesitation too.”

“You did not see hesitation,” she says hotly even though she’s still so cold. “You must have been mistaken.”

He doesn't challenge her lie, if indeed it is a lie.

“Why did you run, Clarice?”

It falls out of her mouth before she can stop it, disobedient little words just dripping from her tongue like the water droplets down her cheeks. Breathless and unwanted. She wants to pick them up and shove them back in her mouth but they run away between her fingers and she can't hold them.

“Because you are keeping me against my will. Because...because Hannibal is saying things that sound right.. And *you*. You are saying things that sound right. And that is *wrong*.”

She has never been more convinced of anything in her life, yet she sits there in Will's embrace and probes the widening crack in her. Like a tongue seeking out a broken tooth over and over; she can't stay away from it.

“Perhaps the things we say sound right because they *are*? Perhaps you are fighting against your own instincts.”

“You are insane,” she whispers into the fire. “Lost. He has warped you, twisted you so badly that you have become his.”

Will shifts a little behind her, but despite her harsh words he doesn't move away. No, he moves closer. He doesn't quite put his chin on her shoulder, but she can feel the ghost of it, can feel the pressure of it making an indent into the muscle where her shoulder meets her neck, and how can that be? How can she feel him like that, so close and so true, when it is but a phantom touch?

“Do you know something, Clarice? We have had many conversations since you arrived here, yet you haven't once asked me to reconsider. You haven't asked me to leave Hannibal. Why do you think that is?”

She opens her mouth, closes it again. There is black ice inside the fault line in her mind, and she slips and slides along it, heedless, out of control.

It is terrifying, even with Will as an anchor at her back.

And he is right. Somehow, it hasn't really entered her mind that he might leave Hannibal. Not really. She hasn't tried to convince him, plead with him, bargain with him. “*Help me escape, Will, come back with me, and I'll see to it that you will be cut a deal.*” In the face of the relationship Will Graham shares with Hannibal Lecter, she had forgotten that she is an FBI agent. An upholder of the law and the largest part of her identity.

How could that *be*?

What is happening to her? What will happen to her?

How hard did Hannibal work to fracture Will? Had he twisted the younger man and then bent him back right, so that he'd heal wrong? Are their cracks crossed now, and fused? Have they become a violent entity, a warped chimera unable to survive without all its parts? Yes, she thinks so. She thinks that they live under each other's skin; drink blood beaten by the other's heart.

Look out of each other's eyes.

Where, then, can she fit? Is she *meant* to fit?

She is so tired. Delusional. At a precipice, falling forward with her arms tied to her sides.

"Are you happy, Will?"

Her voice breaks into an ugly sob around the question.

"I am as happy as I am ever likely to get, Clarice. Do you want me to give that up?"

"No," she says, and she finds that she means it. She doesn't want him to give that up. But even so. But *even so*:

"But what am I? What is it that you *want*, Will? *You*, not Hannibal. What is it that *you* want from me?"

He's quiet for a few heartbeats; she can feel how they resonate within her, leads from her spinal cord through the birdcage of her ribs into her lungs, unfurls there like force grown blooms.

"I want you to live, Clarice. I want you to be alive. Do you think you can? Do you think you can, for me? *Be* that?"

"I don't know," she says. Then: "I feel safe now," and it comes out with the harsh sharpness of an accusation. It *is* an accusation. "I feel safe. How wrong is that? How twisted? I shouldn't... I can't..."

He shushes her, low noises in the back of his throat, and she becomes aware that he is rocking her, back and forth, back and forth. A quiet lullaby in his beating heart, the warmth of his skin, his breaths. And she falls and soars a thousand years in the cradle of him, her mind playing hopscotch, restless, becalmed.

And it is so very quiet now, the storm settling, and with its rest that peculiar, beautiful silence that only happens during snowfall. The otherworldly whiteness too, seeping through the window and burnishing the cabin in a cold silver. Cold meets the warmth of fire and she sits there in his arms, and she can almost breathe. She thinks she can maybe *breathe*.

"You can sleep now, Clarice. I will watch over you. Hannibal will come for us in the morning."

And her eyes grow heavy, and her head falls back to rest on the shoulder of Will Graham.

elements

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter 10: elements

She wakes to silence and daylight.

There are conflicting signals. Conflicting sensations. And even though she has slept, dreamless and oblivious, she is perfectly exhausted.

She is hot.

She is cold.

She aches.

She is comfortable.

She is terrified.

She feels safe.

After a few seconds of scattered, broken confusion she is able to orient herself.

Remember.

She is in a remote cottage with Will Graham. Last night she tried to escape, nearly getting herself killed in the process. Will found her and offered her his hand. She chose to take it.

Will.

Slowly she opens her eyes. She is sure that she fell asleep sitting up, leaning back against Will. Now she is laying down, they both are, and she's got her nose pressed into his chest. His arms are about her, holding her close to him, and she is breathing his heartbeats.

The fire must have burned down overnight. The air around her is freezing cold, but every part of her that touches Will is warm. The contrast is very nearly excruciating. All of her body hurts, most noticeably her head. She is parched and famished. Even so, she feels like she's

floating. Comfortable wrapped in the landscape of Will Graham, and, just as she had told him last night, she is feeling horribly safe.

She is so very tired and broken down, and part of her wants to stay like this. Close to him in false refuge.

Their legs are tangled together, which makes it tricky for her to get clear without waking him, but she needn't have bothered with stealth; his eyes come open the second she begins moving. She wonders if he has even slept, but thinks he must have; his heartbeats and his breaths had been slow and calm.

"Good morning," she says and sits up, feeling awkward; the cottage is no longer cast in the dim, flickering light of the fire but in harsh daylight, and she is almost naked. She grabs one of the old blankets that he has used to cover them, and wraps it tightly about herself. It is musty, but it's better than to stand before Will wearing only the silk underwear no doubt chosen by Hannibal.

Will stands, seeming more at ease. He stretches a little, before reaching for his clothes and beginning to pull them on. They are still dry, unlike hers that are in a miserable, sodden heap over in the corner. He follows her gaze.

"Hannibal will come with clothes for you. I didn't bring any last night. I thought it more important to travel at speed, unencumbered by provisions."

She only nods, and he hands her his woollen undershirt.

"Put this on, though. It will help some."

It's a kindness, one which she accepts. She pulls it over her head, and brings the blanket down to her waist like a cumbersome sari. His shirt is cold from sitting on the floor all night, but it smells of Will. She hates how that relaxes her, makes her shoulder loosen just minutely. Has her senses spent the night subconsciously being taught that Will Graham means safety?

She looks at him. He is ruffled and rumpled, hair standing in all directions, stubble growing around the neat lines of his beard. Lids heavy, but eyes sharp and keen as he returns her gaze. No looking away. That won't happen here, not on either of their parts. They are, she senses, entirely beyond that. They are somewhere else now, they have taken a step *across*, cemented by her accepting his hand. She looks at him, tries to glide along those curious lines of vulnerability and danger that envelopes him.

She finds that she wants to tell him that she really meant it, what she said last night. That she doesn't want him to give up his happiness. That he deserves to have it.

But she doesn't say it. It would mean admitting too much, showing weakness beyond what she has already shown.

She glances out of the one window. It has stopped snowing, she sees, but the sky is of wrought iron and there is that queer stillness that begets another snowfall. Clouds bloated and distended with more winter.

“Will he come by car?” she asks. “Hannibal?”

“Yes, but it will take a little while. There is a groundskeeper, but it will take some time to plough a passable route down to here.”

He smiles a little, just an amused quirk of his lip. She realises that she must look openly calculating at the information he has revealed. He preempts her:

“The groundskeeper never comes up to the house. You won’t have reason to see him, let alone talk to him.” He raises a brow at her, she thinks in challenge. “And we keep the car keys on our persons at all times.”

She tucks that piece of knowledge away. It might come in handy.

Will follows along with ease.

“Clarice...”

“Yes?”

“You might not accept it yet, but a decision was made last night. By you. And even if you deny it...you won’t get away from here. You would only hurt yourself - or worse - trying.”

She sighs.

“Will Hannibal be terribly angry with me?”

It’s a response, and it isn’t. Will knows it.

“He agreed to let me come for you,” he says and takes a step closer.

She wants to back away, and she wants to stand there and let him come. She doesn’t want to understand his non-answer, but she does.

Hannibal values his freedom above all. He has only once relinquished it of his own free will, and that was for Will. Last night he was again willing to place it in Will’s hands, trusting that he wouldn’t drop it. Trusting that he would go find the one person in the world with enough knowledge to take them both down. Trusting that he would bring her back.

That a man like that would take a risk like this in the first place. That he didn’t just simply kill her back when she began unspooling things. Such risk.

There are so many implications, and her view much clearer of their relationship now.

Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter: Clarice thinks they might be equals.

And Hannibal *is* angry, is what Will doesn’t say. And...and... he has stopped moving towards her, he stays where he is, doesn’t get any closer.

...she would like him to get closer. It's an ugly realisation, but no less true for it. There has been touch, of course, since they took her. Hannibal has seen to it, since the night of her first attempted escape. But it has been of a conquering, manipulative nature, wielded as a weapon and a tool. And last night she got to rediscover what touch feels like on its most primitive level.

Survival. Warmth.

Like a newborn thriving on skin on skin contact, human touch and heartbeats and breaths, she now feels that she can't be without again. Not when she has so recently rediscovered it. Not when she's been left deprived for so long; long before she ran afoul of Will and Hannibal.

Yes, she would like Will Graham to get closer. But he stays out of reach.

"What happens now?" she asks, and she recognises that her voice is forlorn.

"I make another fire. We wait for Hannibal. We stay warm."

Once again, not an answer, but she just nods, and then helps Will break up the remaining chair and light a new fire. When it's crackling with hunger Will ventures outside briefly to collect more firewood with which to feed it. She thinks nothing of staying put in the cabin while he is out, nothing at all. She chooses to not consider that too closely.

And when the fire is fat and sated, spreading blessed warmth across the small room, Will sits down on the floor in front of it. She joins him, and it is she electing to sit so close that their legs and arms touch. Will says nothing of it, simply sits quietly, and once again she begins drifting on his breaths. There is the fire, here is the warmth of him, and his breathing enveloping her, lulling her, robbing her of time, and she floats, she...

...she jerks and jumps, not quite sure if she's been sleeping, when she can hear a vehicle pulling up outside.

When a car door slams shut and steps crunch on the snow outside, Will leans so near to her, almost close enough that his lips touch the delicate shell of her ear. She shivers.

"Do you remember? Do you remember what it is that I want from you?"

Even though she is hazy and exhausted and skirting confusion she knows immediately what he is talking about. He told her last night, didn't he?

Live. He wants her to *live*.

She has time only to nod at him, then Hannibal opens the door.

She stands immediately, entirely unwilling to have him hovering above her. Will stands too, and she notes that he is just the smallest half step in front of her. Hannibal won't miss that, she knows. Hannibal doesn't miss anything.

His face is placid, expressionless as he walks through the doorway, but she is learning to read him quite well, is beginning to know how to decipher what isn't there.

He, however, doesn't look at her. Not at first. His attention is on Will. He gets close, a hand on Will's shoulder, his attention rapt.

"Are you well?"

Will inclines his head.

"I'm fine. This was nothing I couldn't handle. You know that."

"Of course. And yet..."

He cuts himself off, nods curtly then looks at her. She stands with her chin raised, back straight, meets his eyes as if she isn't wearing Will's undershirt and an old blanket for a skirt. As if she's not battered and worn with wild hair and wilder eyes.

"Hello, Dr Lecter."

"Clarice. I brought you some clothes so you may be more comfortable on our way back to the house."

"Thank you, Dr Lecter. That's very kind."

"Of course," he says and nods once, and what a *decorus* pantomime they are partaking in.

Both men politely turn their backs as she puts on their clothes, then she is ushered out to the car. It's a sleek black 4x4, entirely appropriate for the terrain and climate. Hannibal drives, and Will sits in the backseat with her, presumably to prevent a daring escape while in motion.

They needn't worry. She is in no condition to do anything but rest her head against the window and look out at the landscape.

The ride back is deathly silent. Will sits easily next to her, and Hannibal stiff in the driver's seat. She, she tries to pay as much attention as possible, but it is for nought. All she sees is snow and pines and jagged mountain peaks. There are no signs of habitation, not even obvious roads. It is just desolate wilderness domed by an ironclad sky.

Before too long, after a few sharp turns that she stubbornly memorises, they stop by an imposing gate. Hannibal keys it open from inside the car, and they drive through, onto a winding, tree-lined drive. The house is coming into view, at first just glimpses through the naked trees, and she isn't even trying to hide her interest; she leans forward in her seat, eager to get a good look at the outside of her prison for the very first time.

It's a Jacobean style manor house. Three stories, as she had already known. Old, but with newer additions, creating an odd sort of harmony between gothic and modern. Lead framed windows on the higher floors, enormous single pane ones going floor to ceiling on the ground floor. There are arcades and parapets paired with sharp angles and glass. It stands with pines and mountains rising up high above it, framing it, almost embracing it. In summer, she imagines, it must look spectacular against so much green.

They pull into a circular drive in front of the house, and Hannibal quickly parks right in front of the big front door, then jumps out and helps her exit the car

Always so courteous.

As they walk into the hallway she draws a breath and turns to him. He is removing his cashmere coat and his thick fur hat, and there is a sharpness to his precise movements that betrays just how irked he is.

“Dr. Lecter,” she says, trying to keep her voice calm and not to slur. “I know that you are very cross with me. I know that I have, once again, been unacceptably rude. I know that you warned me of the consequences. And I will face them. I *will*. All I ask is that you wait until tomorrow. I am so very tired. And filthy. Just...tomorrow. Please.”

His eyes are arctic and hellish all at the same time as he considers her. And the economical shake of his head, it dooms her.

“I think not, Clarice. Come with me.”

And Will strokes her with the most fleeting of touches across her lower back as Hannibal gestures ahead to the drawing room, but he doesn't intervene. He will not help. And she would feel betrayed but perhaps she doesn't deserve to feel betrayed. Has she got that kind of claim on Will, that he owes her anything at all? No. No, he has been nothing but considerate and respectful of her since she arrived here, and she repaid him by risking his life in a snowstorm.

Would he have had to face a whiteout had he not brought you here against your will, Clarice?

Will, will. How funny.

She shakes away the jumbled thoughts, gives Will one last look of perhaps entreaty, perhaps lament, perhaps censure, then she follows Hannibal into the drawing room.

Without urging she sits down on the chair she has always occupied during their conversations here. Hannibal doesn't immediately join her, but busies himself over by his desk.

When she sees him divesting himself of his suit jacket and tie she tenses, even more so when he rolls up his shirt sleeves. And when suddenly he holds something sharp and glinting in his hand she is torn between fight and flight. She can do neither. She knows, because she's tried; she can neither outrun him nor fight him.

He's too strong, and too fast.

He makes his way over to her, pace quite leisurely but stance like a predator scenting blood and night. Gracefully he folds himself into the chair opposite hers. He stretches his legs out in a movement that is almost lazy, and their knees touch in the same sort of anchor that he has previously insisted upon when they are alone in this room.

She glances down.

He's holding a knife. It's a linoleum knife of course, curved and sharp and lethal, and he's holding it like it's an extension of his hand, sure and deft. It clashes wildly with his sharp clothes, his neat hair, but not at all with his eyes.

Hannibal says nothing, he just studies her with unnerving consideration. A few seconds tick by, and she realises that he is waiting for her to break the silence.

Well, fuck him, she thinks. He wants to play games, he can make the first move.

Then she breaks it anyway:

"Is that the knife you gutted Will with?"

"It is," says Hannibal and places it on its side on the little table next to him, the one normally holding a glass of water and his notepad. She could, in theory, reach it from where she sits, but that notion is of course purely academic.

"And slit Abigail's throat?"

"Yes," he says, and not a trace of regret in his voice. He grabs the curved handle, and with a sharp flick he sets the knife spinning on the tabletop. Like a bottle.

Truth or dare.

It's a threat, she thinks, and it's a game. One she suspects it would be devastating to lose. A pity only that she suspects Hannibal will tell her nothing of the rules.

And she rather believes it is nothing like *quid pro quo*.

"You are tired, Clarice," says Hannibal, voice even and low. "Lean back."

And he spins the knife again. Around and around it goes, the sound of wood and metal rotating into a hum, a hum that settles around her, sinks into her, makes her bones resonate. It's soothing and grating simultaneously, but all the same she reclines backward against the sensation.

"I fear you have been very careless, Clarice," comes Hannibal's voice, and she realises that it sounds unbodied because she has closed her eyes. She opens them again, as he continues:

"You have been given chances. You have squandered them. It is time for you to listen to me very carefully. It is time for the two of us to reach a final understanding. Don't you think so?"

The hum slows as she nods, then speeds up again as Hannibal gives the knife another casual flick.

"There is Will and me. Then there is, I believe, Will and *you*. There will be, perhaps, Will, you and I." Another flick, and the anodyne susurrus is lulling her into a queer sort of tunnelvision where there is only Hannibal and his eyes so very close. "And you and I, Clarice."

It is getting so dark. She is here but she is not at the same time, and there are shadows, winding, thorny shadows thrown onto the wall behind his head. And his eyes, they glow as they hold her captive and still.

“And for all those constellations to work, there needs to be honesty. From me. Certainly from you. And I think it is time that we are *nothing* but honest with each other.”

“You’ve spoken about honesty before,” she says, and she is surprised how clear and steady her voice is, because she feels like she is floating and sinking at the same time.

“And you have promised to give it before.”

As slumped as she sits, as tired as she is, she still manages to raise her chin.

“It was an *honest* escape attempt.”

The corner of his mouth twitches, just a suggestion of a movement but definitely there.

“I would have thought less of you if you hadn’t tried, of course. You are resilient. Stubborn. Strong. *Brave*. You know, catching the couturier in Ohio was a true feat. And your efforts since, however hampered by bureaucracy and pettiness, have been quite impressive. Not least your mission to find us.”

“There is no telling if I would have succeeded though,” she says, and she hears her own voice from afar. “You found me first.”

“You might well have. I told you, Clarice, that you walk on fire. You walk a path between back country robustness and transcendent elegance. Stable. Beautiful. On the periodic table, you might touch down somewhere between iron and silver. You remind me of someone very special to me.”

He takes a breath, spins the knife again and she feels like she spins with it, that Hannibal is the only firm point left in the room. That she must cling to him in order not to be sucked unto the temporal maelström he is creating with his knife.

“But that doesn’t change the fact that our situation here is...precarious. It cannot be jeopardised. I will not risk the freedom and health of Will, nor myself. Do you understand?”

“I do,” she says. “I do understand that.”

The knife spins on, and she spins along with the sound. All narrows, darkens ever more, she can see nothing but Hannibal and the shadows behind him. Smoke and thorns and horns.

“Where are we, Clarice?”

Confused, she tries to look around, but finds that she can’t take her eyes from him.

“We...we are in the drawing room, Dr. Lecter.”

The knife keeps spinning on the table, and she blinks against her exhaustion and wonders if he really has, somehow, taken her somewhere else.

“Will told me about the stag. And he told me you see it too. Curious, don’t you think.”

She tries to keep up with him, with his change of direction, with how his questions maybe aren't questions at all.

“You may walk on fire, but I told you there is darkness inside of you too. A wealth of it. Else you would be unable to see the beast.”

“I don’t know what it means.”

“Oh, but you do, Clarice. And that knowledge doesn’t live very deep at all. In fact, it is ready and waiting just beneath the very surface of you.”

“I think you try to find darkness everywhere, Dr. Lecter. I think you thrive on it. Thrive on it so much that you may go looking for it where there is none. To corrupt. *Warp*.”

His smile is openly cruel, and as sharp as the knife that he flicks again.

“We will see. After all, metamorphosis takes place in nature all the time. Profound changes in form, in structure, substance... But could it take place if the very foundations were not already laid? I think not. Consider it: from egg, to larvae, to cocoon, to imago. Moth. Severe transformations, but all following a preordained path.”

She stiffens at his unsubtle way of reminding her of Jaime Gumb’s crimes, the horrors of his basement, and Hannibal looks pleased, looks like he is eating her unease straight out of the air.

And the knife spins, and it spins, and it spins again. It moves with terrible purpose now, and she knows that Hannibal is about to truly pounce.

“Where are we now, Clarice?”

They are no longer where they should be. She is sure of it. She can’t see any of it anymore, she floats in different shades of black with only Hannibal to keep her put.

“Somewhere...else. Crossroads. My sanity ends, your madness begins.”

“You think me insane?”

“No. Madness and insanity...with you they are two separate things.”

“Your honesty is refreshing, thank you. It feels good to have all of it, at last. I wish for it to remain boundless, but we shall see, shan’t we?”

“You’re welcome, Dr. Lecter,” she says and clings to the armrests of her chair so that she doesn’t just get pulled under. He seems to notice her predicament which is really anguish, and he places a hand on her temple to keep her more solidly anchored.

“What is your greatest fear, Clarice?”

Or perhaps he’s not anchoring her, but burrowing. Burrowing into her, beneath her epidermis, her bones, her skull. She feels sure that he holds her mind in his cupped hand, going deeper even than the knowledge he claims lives within her.

And the question he asked is no less heavy for being an echo.

The hum the knife makes against the table - such infernal acoustics! - pulls truth from her lips like red string.

“To be sent away. Rejected.”

“Like the FBI rejected you.”

Not a question. She treats it like one regardless.

“Yes, and...”

She cuts herself off, but Hannibal looks like he’s catching what she doesn’t say, right there in the diminishing borderland of air between them. His knee is moving against hers, his thumb strokes her jawline, and he is eager. He looks like he’s about to reach between her ribs and scoop out all that is her, drink it down like milk and honey and marrow.

“And?” he prompts, his voice sounding far too close.

“My mother sent me away. After my father died. She sent me away.”

“How did your father die, Clarice?”

The hum of the spinning knife forbids her from staying quiet.

“He was a police officer. He was shot during a robbery. They shot my daddy.”

She can hear her own voice, how it’s turned high and childlike, how thickly her accent drips from her lips.

“He was in hospital for a long time after. Then he died.”

“And what happened after he died?”

He has moved from his chair, she’s sure. He must have. His face seems close enough that he might rest his lips on her brow, but all she can really focus on is the susurrus of Damascus steel against wood.

“Mommy sent me away. She couldn’t afford to care for me any longer. She sent me to live with a relative. He was a rancher. I ran away from him.”

“Why did you run away? What did this man *do* to you, Clarice?”

“He didn’t...not what you th...he...lambs. I found *lambs*. In the barn. For slaughter. They screamed. They *screamed*. And I couldn’t...I can’t save them. I ran away that night. I took an old horse and a lamb and I ran away. And he was so angry afterwards he sent me to an orphanage.”

Hannibal’s face is terrible. His face is *beyond*, and her confession and trauma ambrosia to him. Yes, his pupils dilated and her scent must be so sweet in his nose, vulnerable and ripe.

“And so you have been abandoned by everyone, haven’t you, Clarice. They have left you and they have turned their backs. Your father. Your mother. Jack Crawford. The FBI.”

“Yes.”

He’s so close now, whispering his soft but sharp questions straight into her ear.

“And is that what you dream about at night? The *screams* ? From the lambs? From the girls? Victims left unsaved. Do the screams breach your bone fort, Clarice?”

“*Yes.*”

There is something warm and wet on her face, and first she thinks that it’s blood, then she realises that it’s tears. That she’s crying, sobbing, drawing large gasping breaths like she might never breathe right again. And she finds suddenly that Hannibal’s arms are wrapped around her, that she is on his lap. That her head is on his shoulder, his lips in her hair. For a second she stiffens, remembering the last time he nuzzled her, but then she relaxes. Cries onto him, into him, and feels how greedily he feeds on her hurt as he gently shushes her.

“You won’t be rejected here, Clarice. Won’t be sent away or abandoned. Will and I, we accept you just as you are, and just as you will be.”

Ah, he is a devil, a corrupter.

The release of tears is short lived. Gradually, she becomes aware that something cold and sharp rests against her throat. When she tries to move she is prevented, the sting sharp against her jugular, a wet sensation in her suprasternal notch telling her that he has drawn a trickle of blood.

She tries to sort the signals and the cues, but comes up short. She can still hear the lulling, infernal hum of the blade spinning right there on the table. It’s still there. It hasn’t stopped. But it seems there is another blade held, almost teasingly, against her skin. She can feel the metal vibrate with her pulse, can feel her heartbeat against the blade. Will the acoustics get trapped in the steel, she wonders. Will Hannibal draw this knife, years from now, bring it to his mouth and feel her trapped heartbeats against his tongue?

Will he steal them now, her beats? Will he do it? If he wields the knife just right - and of course he would - will he be able to sip her blood straight out of her jugular vein?

She remains held close to him, firm in his embrace, tears drying on her cheeks, as she realises that she actually doesn’t know. She doesn’t know if he will kill her right now or let her live.

And *god*, is there a wonderful sense of freedom in that! In being relieved of agency and decision, in being left entirely to someone else's desire. Floating entirely unencumbered by choice.

She relaxes into him, becomes heavy and pliant. He can feel it, he must do, feel how she yields against him.

His lips find her ear.

“Do you understand me, Clarice?”

She wants to say that he hasn't said anything, given her anything to understand, but that would mean insulting both of their intelligence. He is making himself very clear indeed. He might not abandon her, but he will kill her if he has to, and those two things aren't mutually exclusive in his mind. She is on her last life. He will tolerate no more foolishness, no more rebellion. From now on she is to play the game precisely according to his rules.

Or he will eat her, and damn Will Graham's wishes.

The hum slows, the linoleum knife on the table about to come to a standstill. Her cheek rests against his chest, his shirt damp from her tears, his blade still held sharp against her jugular. His free hand is playing with the hair at her nape, soothing movements in sharp contrast to the death at her throat. Her eyes wide open, and they are, the both of them, back where they began. The drawing room, she can see it clearly now. From being a feared space it now presents itself as something comforting, welcoming, in comparison to the place she just travelled to with him.

With effort she twists just enough in his grip that she may meet his eyes. He doesn't let up on the knife, and she can feel more blood trickling down the column of her throat, but she considers it a worthy sacrifice. She wants to be able to see him clearly as she gives Will Graham what he requested of her.

“I understand perfectly, Dr. Lecter.”

It is a smile on his lips, not just a twitch.

“That is very good, Clarice. It would seem that we finally have a true accord.”

The knife at her throat remains though, and she wonders if he might forget himself, if he might be ruled by his own bloodlust. The question becomes more acute when almost absentmindedly he reaches out with his free hand, gently dips the tip of his finger in the blood on her throat, then brings the digit to his mouth. His eyes darken at the taste, his face turns severe, all blue hues and sharp lines. His grip on her tightens, he brings her closer into him, and suddenly the air around them is thick and hard to breathe. She shifts slowly on his lap, feeling heavy, warm.

“But I don't want you to break me, Dr. Lecter. I don't want to be taken apart and then put back together again according to your wishes. What will it take for you not to do that? What must I do?”

Oh god, the amusement on his face is something terrible to behold. His finger remains on his lip. It is just a little bit red, before his tongue flicks out and swipes up the last smudge of blood. Then he pounces while sitting entirely still.

“Accept this. Accept us. Just as we accept you. All of you. Silver and iron and everything between.”

She hadn't meant to nod but she finds herself doing it anyway.

“I understand. But I don't think I can become something that I am not.”

“We are not asking that. We are only asking that you do not fight against inevitable change. You are stubborn, yes. Perhaps too much. Perhaps to your own detriment.”

She shifts on his lap and wonders how he can make a knife on her neck seem affectionate. She doesn't understand him. Suddenly she finds herself wanting to understand him. And that, she thinks, might be most dangerous of all.

“You wanted to kill me rather than capture me.”

“I did not.”

She shakes her head.

“But...you said...Will said...”

He shushes her.

“Not true. And don't you think, Clarice, that Will and I might have had different reasons for bringing you here?”

“What do you mean?”

“May I be blunt?”

“Please.”

“I advocated for killing you precisely because I knew Will would balk at it and suggest an alternative way to bring an end to your search.”

It feels as if she's still spinning with the knife, even though it sits silent and still on the table.

“So you...wanted me to come here?”

“I did.”

“Why?”

He looks at her for a long time, before answering.

“I fear you are not yet ready to hear the answer to that, Clarice.”

“Will you let me know when?”

“I promise.”

And then, gently and seemingly without any effort at all, he lifts her off him and sets her down in her own chair. The knife slips from her neck just like that, and she is suddenly feeling horrifically cold.

“You need to rest now. Go to bed. But first, I would like to give you something with which to remember this by. For when you slip. For when you doubt yourself, and me, and Will. For when you feel tempted to cling to dated values and morals.”

He slides down onto the floor in front of her chair, and she is forced to spread her legs slightly to accommodate the bulk of his chest. She can feel her heart moving in her mouth, the copper tang, the beats.

“What is it?” she whispers.

“Something of permanence. Something you will never forget. Lift your shirt.”

“What?”

“Lift up your shirt, Clarice.”

She would like to say no, but if she does, will she betray the wishes of Will? Will Hannibal kill her? Will she lose any chance of understanding, and perhaps be free? She doesn't know, and she doesn't want to take the risk. Slowly she lifts the hem of her shirt up to just underneath her breasts, bares the vulnerability of her abdomen to him, and she wonders if her will is really hers. Or does he still hold it in his hand, in the thrum of steel on wood?

Hannibal immediately brings the knife to her belly. She jerks, tries to press herself back into her chair, disappear, but he uses his free hand to grasp hold of her hip. Keep her still for him.

“What are you...”

“I won't hurt you,” he assures, then deftly cuts into her. She gasps, whines, but she can't move. She can feel warm blood running into the waistband of her pants, she can hear how her skin parts for him. She can't feel any pain though, and from afar she thinks it might be because of the sharpness of the blade.

“Stay still for me, and it will be over soon,” he murmurs, and he wields the knife as a painter's brush, moving it with surety and finesse and something like abandon. And it begins to hurt now, sensations catching up with her. He cuts shallowly, the wounds superficial but the sting infernal and acute. She breathes through her nose, tries to cast her eyes around and distract herself from what he is doing. But it seems she can't see clearly unless she is looking at him. So she winds her fingers into his hair and clings to the sight of his forehead and brow and the slope of his nose as he uses the knife to draw on her. His breath is hellishly hot on the exposed fragility of her belly, and she fights the urge to throw her head back.

How can he be on his knees before her yet still rule so absolutely?

She uses the pain to shape words to give him.

“Who is it that I remind you of?”

He blows on her belly as he cuts. Is he trying to soothe? She thinks not.

“My little sister Mischa. I loved her very much. I ate her.”

As she fights the awful combination of horror and fascination and supplication he finishes with a small flourish. Remaining on his knees he looks up at her, and there is fire and darkness tearing each other to pieces in his eyes.

“I think you may call me Hannibal again.”

He walks her to her bedroom and bids her goodnight, and he doesn't lock her in. When he is gone she lifts the hem of her shirt, squints downwards. There, gracefully following the line of one of her ribs, are letters and signs in beautiful, bloodied cursive:

Fe <—> Ag.

Chapter End Notes

Ok so I know that Hannibal already used the “between iron and silver” line on Chiyo in the series, but I am choosing to disregard that here. Nothing against Chiyo, but that line was a bit wasted on her. And he said/wrote it to Clarice first (in the novel).

fragments

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Typhoid and Swans

Chapter 11: fragments

Clarice wakes on a broken gasp. Her neck hurts; she'd fallen asleep curled up in the Chesterfield. She has dreamt, but she can remember nothing of her dreams beyond a confused jumble of antlers and smoke. That, and the certainty that those dreams had been nightmares.

She staggers from chair to bed and lays down, stretches out, and attempts to take stock.

The wound on her belly stings and burns, her neck is tender, her joints ache and her head pounds. She is starving, and thirsty, and her tongue feels too big for her mouth. She ought to get a sense of time, she ought to drink plenty water, and she ought to seek out food.

She stays in bed for now.

She would rather not, she would rather shy away, but she knows that before she faces Hannibal and Will again, she needs to face what had happened yesterday.

It had been ugly, and it had been humiliating.

Her second attempt at escaping had been as dismal a failure as her first. Sure, she had gotten further away, but it had been as doomed as the first one, and the repercussions much worse. The feelings of failure compounded by the fact that Hannibal and Will had *allowed* her to run. She acknowledges to herself that she doesn't yet know all of their reasons for doing so, but she suspects curiosity is near the top. Manipulation surely somewhere just above or below curiosity.

She takes some jagged comfort in the fact that she can at least see that much. She isn't yet so far gone that her eyes and mind have become entirely clouded to their motives.

But, she thinks grimly, there can be no doubt that she *is* rather far gone. Too far, some might say, to turn back.

Last night she had peeled away strips of her own skin. She had fashioned them into an intricate, bloody tapestry, and she had allowed Hannibal to read her like tea leaves.

Of course, it could be worse, she thinks with the bleakest of gallows' humour. The stripping away of her skin had only happened figuratively. Mason Verger had been less lucky.

And she cannot deny that along with the humiliation she is also feeling...lighter, for what she shared with Hannibal last night. For what Hannibal *took* from her last night. It would seem he cut a lot of hurt and anger and ugliness out of her with his linoleum knife.

It doesn't take away the repugnance of violation, but it does make it easier to swallow.

And then there is Will...what she had shared with Will.

Hannibal had, quite expertly and nimbly, persuaded her to turn herself inside out. He had seen her expose her insides to his gaze. And he had feasted, had Hannibal, on all her hurt and trauma.

And Will had made her swear a vow. Just a simple vow.

Time will tell which one of them will cause the worst damage.

Or the *least*. And *that* is how she should approach this, she thinks: with a view of surviving almost whole. That would be the best case scenario.

And the worst...the worst isn't a situation in which she ends up on Hannibal's table.

She knows it isn't. Just as she knows she can't hide up here. She needs to move forward. Things changed last night and she needs to find out precisely how, and then she needs to adapt. She needs to...resign herself. Is that what she needs to do? Resign herself to this? Is survival really more important than agency and freedom?

She snorts at the ceiling. Of course it fucking is. Anything else is just lofty bullshit ideals that wouldn't float for a second in a true life or death situation.

Which is what this is.

She stands with some difficulty, and opens the door that Hannibal, despite her latest stunt, left unlocked last night. Perhaps in mockery, perhaps just to see. She squints at the bank of casement windows across the hallway. It is dark outside, but with a hint of grey. So it's morning. Hannibal will probably be preparing breakfast downstairs, and she really ought to eat.

But more than food and water she wants...she wants...

...she wants *Will*, she realises with something that isn't quite surprise, but perhaps, yes, fucking resignation. She wants the kindness warring with dusky danger in his eyes, she wants his slow thoughtful movements, she wants his steady breaths. She remembers his heart beating against hers, and she wants that too, maybe.

That, more than hunger and thirst, is what gets her moving, what sees her washing her face and carding her fingers through her hair and then making for the stairs. She can bathe and change into fresh clothes later, right now it seems more important to see Will.

As she had guessed, there are homely noises coming from the kitchen. There is the smell of coffee, of bread, of bacon.

She sticks her head into the large, modern space, but doesn't enter. She isn't yet ready to be in the same kitchen as Hannibal Lecter.

"Good morning," she says, and then, remembering what he had told her last night, she adds: "...Hannibal."

He nods at her, and turns some bacon in the frying pan. She hopes it's from an actual pig.

"Ah, Clarice," he says. "Good morning. Please sit, breakfast will be ready momentarily."

She nods and returns to the dining room. She sits down just as he comes through balancing plates, and he catches her wince as her raw belly brushes against the table cloth. She is getting better and better at reading the microscopic cues on his face, and she knows that he is not at all contrite over the injury he caused her. Quite the opposite: she sees satisfaction in the one infinitesimally upturned corner of his mouth, and she reads fond reminiscence in his heavy eyelids as he watches how she sits very straight on the chair so her abdomen won't touch the edge of the table.

"I want to clean your wound after breakfast. We must ensure it doesn't get infected."

She spreads the starched white linen napkin over her lap and shivers.

"Yes, of course."

She doesn't tell him that she can do it herself, because she knows that he wants the opportunity to admire his own handiwork.

Hannibal plates up while she sips on some orange juice, then he sits down and, with a polite nod at her, begins to eat. She looks around whilst picking up her knife and fork. She's confused. Hannibal, such a stickler for etiquette.

"Where is Will?"

Hannibal chews and swallows and delicately wipes his mouth with a napkin before answering.

"Will had to go away for a few days."

She doesn't like how that makes her feel. She doesn't like it at all. And in the confused emotional jumble of "why?" and "where?" her first question is:

"Did you not want to go with him?"

"Very much so, Clarice, but I am afraid that this time it simply wasn't possible."

She knows, of course, why that is.

“Sorry to be an inconvenience.”

“Not at all,” he says lightly. “It is my pleasure to remain here with you.”

It is, she suspects, not *her* pleasure at all.

“Of course,” she says. Then: “Was it not hard for Will to leave with all this snow?”

It’s rare that she sees blatant amusement on Hannibal’s placid face, but she sees it now, brought forth, no doubt, by her unapologetic fishing.

“Some roads have been ploughed, and Will has the means,” is all he says though, and is quite kind enough to refrain from following up with: unlike *you*, Clarice.

She hears it loud and clear though.

Hannibal goes back to eating his bacon and egg and croissant with hearty enthusiasm. Suddenly lacking appetite despite having been ravenous only five minutes ago, she nibbles on a piece of toast.

Her thoughts are snarled and confused, and Hannibal stays mercifully silent as she attempts to make sense of them.

There is, of course, unease over being all alone with Hannibal in desolate, remote surroundings.

But worse than that is the fact that Will just... *left*.

He hunted her down and saved her life, slept with her in his arms, made her swear him a vow that saw her letting Hannibal eat all her corner stones and building blocks. Will made her *need* him. Then he left.

She stands so abruptly that her chair almost falls over backwards. She manages to keep her voice polite when she addresses Hannibal though.

“Excuse me. I’m afraid I’m not very hungry.”

Hannibal stays quiet and allows her to leave the room.

“Will you join me for a walk, Clarice? Will’s beasts must be exercised.”

Accompanied by the dogs she has haunted the second and third floor, drifting between her room and Will’s nook and the hallways and stairs in between, stubbornly refusing to interact with Hannibal. And it’s not even fear that is causing her to avoid him, at least not completely. Rather it is...things she doesn’t want to look at.

Now he appears to have decided to remedy that, standing framed by the doorway to Will's nook, holding a tray. Seeing him feels disorienting for some reason. Then it occurs to her that, unless he has been accompanying her, she has only ever seen him downstairs. Kitchen, drawing room, dining room, the grand hall. She doesn't know where he sleeps. Thinking of that inexplicably makes her think of sitting snuggled on his lap last night, feeling safe and tender and terrified, and her face burns hot and tight.

Even so, there is absolutely no way she will turn down the chance of a sanctioned visit outside.

"I would love to."

He nods, once.

"Then it will be so. First, however, you must eat. And there is your wound to see to." He takes a step into the room and she sees now that there is a small first aid kit sitting next to a sandwich on the tray. "I didn't get the opportunity after breakfast." There is mild reproach in his voice but she can clearly hear the sharpened dagger's edge underneath. "Lift your shirt up for me, please."

She wants to refuse, but one look at his face tells her this is not an option. For whatever reason he is determined to look after her. She daren't speculate why.

She sits down on the chair that Will usually occupies when in here. It feels safer. Without a word she rolls up the hem of her top. Hannibal walks across the floor and puts the tray down on a side table. He sinks into a crouch before her, graceful and fluid and entirely in such a way that she knows he would have his teeth in her neck within seconds should she make a false move.

It feels unnatural. What prey would willingly bare its neck, or the soft, vulnerable flesh of its belly, to a predator? Yet that is what she is doing, and it goes against every instinct that is keeping her wound tight, ready for flight even though there is nowhere to fly.

She could almost wish for the dissociative state she'd been in last night.

"Eat, Clarice," he says, and without a word she picks up the sandwich, holds it with one hand and her shirt with the other. She takes a bite, and Hannibal on his knees in front of her, making a stance that may seem subservient instead look coiled and dangerous. It is not at all lost on her that they are mirroring the positions they were in when he first *caused* her the injury he is now tending. Only this time she is eating the best BLT she's ever had.

Carefully he soaks some cotton in disinfectant, then sweeps it along the elegant letters he carved into her skin. She is faintly proud of herself for managing not to twitch, or hiss, or swear profusely, even though the sting of the raw wound hurts like acid. She doesn't look at it. In the files back at Quantico she read about how carefully and tenderly he had gutted Will, and she is in no doubt that the cuts he has given her will not fester and infect, but rather will heal into a beautiful silver tattoo just as he had intended.

No, her attention is stolen by his demeanour.

He seems to be careful not to touch her more than necessary. It feels a stark contrast to how he has behaved since the eve of her first escape attempt. That's when he became tactile and imposing, seemingly determined to get her used to his touch the way one would a skittish animal: by persistent exposure.

And she *has* grown used to it. Enough that she is now thrown by his distance.

Just as she is feeling abandoned by Will, she is now also feeling unease that Hannibal won't touch her like he used to. Had she been alone, she thinks, she would have laughed hysterically and torn at her hair. As it is, she sits quietly and holds her top up, allowing Hannibal to clean her wound with brisk efficiency while she tears bite after bite out of her sandwich.

Fuck.

"There," he says. "All done."

She lets her top fall down again just as Hannibal puts two fingers on her chin and tips her head back. He swipes the cotton across the nick on her throat just as she gulps down the last morsel of food. His fingers move with her swallow.

Then he takes his hands off her, and she stands as he does. He takes a step back where he normally wouldn't, and creates a polite distance. She tries to hide a frown by looking down at her bare feet.

"May I have some socks and shoes if we are going outside?"

Hannibal's mouth twitches, but his voice is even as he answers.

"Of course. And no doubt there will be outerwear to borrow." Politely he refrains from pointing out that she already availed herself of that opportunity the other night.

She calls the dogs, and together they head down the stairs, her steps quick and keen, Hannibal with the same smooth purpose as always. In the mud room he opens a cupboard she hadn't even noticed before. In there hangs a thick ladies parka, and on the floor stands a pair of fur lined boots that look to be her size. Both are new, with tags on. Quite clearly meant for her.

"So you did intend for me to see the outside," she says as she pulls on first the boots, then the coat, the dogs making both tasks difficult as they mill around her feet, bodies vibrating with excitement.

Hannibal only nods, then hands her gloves and a hat and a scarf.

"Wrap up well."

She obeys as he pulls on his own coat and his ushanka, somehow managing not to look ridiculous in it.

Then he opens the door she escaped out of just the other night, and beckons her ahead of him.

She's so eager. So very excited to look around that she forgets for a moment how exhausted and weak she is feeling.

It snows, but it is gentle, fat snowflakes somersaulting in slow motion. The wind too is a mere breeze, playful and soft, ruffling her hair and painting her cheeks. The light is poor, even though it must be close to midday. She's grateful to have it though - she thinks it can't have been long ago this place was held in the eternal darkness of an arctic winter.

It might not seem that way at this moment, but spring is approaching this faraway place. And along with spring might come opportunity.

Hannibal takes her towards the back of the great house, The dogs run ahead, and she smiles despite herself. The simple happiness of their wagging tails and lolling tongues as they face-dive into the snow soothes her. They run in among spruce and pine and fir, Clarice and Hannibal following at a slower pace. It's even more quiet in here, among the trees, and darker too, everything held in a perpetual frigid dusk. She thinks of the woods behind Will's Wolf Trap home, where everything began. These woods seem deeper, more impenetrable, and the incline is very steep. She is grateful that her instincts led her right the other night, led her around to the front of the house and onwards. Had she ran this way Will might not have found her.

Hannibal stays close to her, but doesn't touch, and it's making her skin crawl.

"Tell me about her," she says, and it's part genuine curiosity, part a need for a reaction. "Tell me about Mischa."

Hannibal stops, and turns to her, and as she mirrors him she is concerned that she has angered him. *Unleashed* him.

A thrill of adrenaline shoots through her.

But his face is calm in the twilight of the woods, and his gaze steady. He doesn't look at her though, not quite, he looks off very slightly to the left, somewhere beyond her shoulder. His voice is very deliberate, very sober, but his face is almost gentle. Far in the distance behind him the stag walks among the trees, so black as to be almost inky blue against the soft shadows.

But she focuses on Hannibal, letting the beast wander on for now.

"She was very brave and very stubborn. She loved summer and butterflies. If the cook made kūchiukai she would sneak down into the kitchen and steal some. She disliked having her hair brushed, and she hated being cold. She had a sweet laugh. She was terrified of being abandoned. She used to hold my hand."

His focus shifts back to her then, and she suddenly can't move and can't breathe in the face of the abysm she sees in him.

"But she didn't *make* me."

Then he begins walking back, towards the vague light where the forest opens to the great house. Before she follows him she turns around and looks behind her.

There stands a little girl with snarled hair and a bloodied cheek, fading away into the shadows as Clarice watches.

She sighs and goes to catch up with Hannibal. They walk quietly back to the house together, the dogs running all around them.

“Thank you,” she tells him seriously and sincerely, “for letting me come outside.”

“It was my pleasure, Clarice.”

Three days go by.

She is proud of herself for correctly interpreting the code of time, for knowing morning from afternoon, night from day. It is the first time since she arrived here that she feels in control of how seconds and minutes and hours work.

She is helped along by Hannibal, and the routines he implements.

They eat breakfast together, and then, when the day is at its lightest, they walk the dogs. She appreciates being outdoors more than she can say. Then lunch, after which Hannibal insists they stick to their sessions in the drawing room. And she thinks why not, it will pass the times until Will returns.

She hopes it is soon.

Dinner always at eight, and it's always delicious, and she always leaves the table feeling full with confusion and a longing for something she can't define.

The rest of the time she is left to her own devices, Hannibal busy in one of the many rooms she is not permitted to go. She obeys her instructions and sticks to the second and third floors. There are many locked doors, but there is still enough space for her to pace and fret, sometimes read, sometimes look out of the windows for long stretches of time, falling into the muted winter colours of the landscape. She holds her arms up to the weak daylight, ensuring she is not becoming transparent, and she might draw little paintings in the frosty condensation on the glass.

Sometimes, when she is feeling unbearably wretched and anxious, she will sit in Will's bedroom. A small, comfortable space, seemingly furnished with odds and ends and rejects, and she feels sure that is entirely Will's choice. The door is not locked, so she tells herself that it's ok that she comes here. In fact, the door has been left ajar, allowing the dogs entrance. This is where they sleep when not shut away in the mud room during meal times, and this is where she sits when her mind grows too loud. On the floor with her back against his bed, trying not to think.

She lifts her head, listens. Hannibal calls her now.

Dinner is served.

They are in the drawing room, and it's the fourth day.

She is sure it is the fourth day. That's nice, she thinks, to be so sure.

She is becoming more and more antsy, impatient, reckless. She feels empty and out of sorts without Will in the house, and with Hannibal using tactics she is unfamiliar with.

She feels lost. More lost.

Just as she has been leaning on Will's breaths, so too she has begun to use the feel of Hannibal's leg against hers as an anchor during their sessions. Without it, her words come loose and tumbling from her mouth without any care. It is dangerous.

She wonders what she has done wrong.

"I want to know why I am here," she mutters, and Hannibal stops scribbling on his pad. It's a stupid fucking thing to be doing anyway, she thinks. As if he's keeping a journal on her while a fugitive.

"Here, with me, right now?"

"Here, in this house. You didn't just bring me here out of self-preservation."

"Not really, no. Pure self-preservation would have meant killing you in order to properly eliminate the threat you posed."

She doesn't miss his use of past tense, and she is offended even as she is forced to once again acknowledge that he is also right. She is absolutely no threat to either of them. He had seen to it that night in the dining room. And Will...she thinks Will might have seen to it too.

"I am also sure that you remember what I said," he carries on. "That there are reasons you were brought here, but you aren't yet ready to hear them. That still stands. You shouldn't attempt to pry, Clarice. It's not very nice."

She hears clearly what he's not saying. Do you really think you can manipulate *me*, Clarice? Trip *me* up?

"I'm sorry," she says. "But things seem to be standing still. Go nowhere. Actually, go backwards. I don't understand my place here. If there *is* a place for me here."

He sits forward at that, suddenly rapt and keen, as if she just said something he has been waiting for.

“You have begun to ponder your space, and you are growing restive.”

“I am,” she says, and she can hear the frustration and yes, even anger in her own voice.

He nods, and he looks pleased. She wants to know why but knows he is very unlikely to tell her.

Damn him.

“I meant what I said the other night, Clarice. Will and I, we are offering you a place to belong. A home. But it takes time to create new spaces in different worlds. Room must be made, pieces must come together. You must be patient.”

“Why would I want that?” she asks. “A home? I *had* a home. You took me away from it.”

He shakes his head, just a little.

“If you *truly* had a home, would you have come looking for us? You had already begun the process of leaving this “home” of your own volition. We simply helped you along.”

He sits back in his chair again, and why does she miss the tension?

“All your life you have been looking to replace what you have lost. You, dirt poor girl without a family, desperate to belong. To prove yourself, be better than your background. You merged your identity with the FBI’s to honour your fallen father. An institution that has treated you with nothing less than contempt. You have searched everywhere for father figures. Look at your relationship with Jack Crawford. Do you believe it a coincidence that it was his death that precipitated all this?”

She, frustrated with not being able to read him, she challenges:

“Is that what you offer, Hannibal? To become my father figure?”

She regrets her lip just as soon as the words have rolled off her tongue.

His eyes flash. Just for second the aloof placidness which she has grown to despise is gone. In its place... *avarice*. Infernal, roaring hunger.

“Is that what you *want*, Clarice?”

His voice is low, rough, his stance in the chair terrifyingly still. Her entire body tingles with it, and she shifts restlessly. The movement brings her leg in contact with his. It burns, and she leaves it there.

“I..I don’t... What do you...”

Hannibal’s face stills while her words fade away, but he says nothing. He crosses his legs, losing the contact between them. She feels cold.

They sit looking at each other for a while, Hannibal perfectly still, her itching for movement or words or something, anything, just...

"Have I done something to offend you?" she blurts out.

The words feel hideous and cumbersome in the silence, stretching it out so taut and see-through before ripping it in two. Too late it occurs to her that Hannibal has engineered it thus, sitting silently and giving her ample opportunity to expose herself.

"No. You have not." Then he changes the subject, leaving her struggling to catch up. "You have been worried and out of sorts these past few days. It is Will's absence, isn't it, that has upset you."

"Yes," she says, without artifice, but doesn't mention that it's not just Will's absence making her feel this way. "I...I feel...."

"You feel abandoned."

"I do, and I don't understand why. This is not a situation where feelings like that have a place, is it?"

"You have been traumatised, and a person..."

"So you agree my situation is traumatic?" she interrupts.

The look he gives her for her rudeness would freeze the blood in her veins if she wasn't quite used to it by now. But his voice gives no hint of emotion as he answers her.

"Of course it's traumatic. Have we ever claimed otherwise?"

She opens her mouth to answer, then realises that she doesn't remember if they have or not. He carries on regardless.

"A person finding themselves in a traumatic situation might start believing that the only thing that could protect them is the most dangerous thing they can find, if it can be convinced to forge a connection."

"Is that what you think I am doing?" she asks. "Trying to endear myself to you?"

"I was not thinking of myself."

She cocks her head as she tries to pinpoint his meaning.

"Will? You mean Will? He is not the most dangerous thing here."

"Isn't he?"

"That's preposterous!" she exclaims and takes in his entire terrifying visage with a gesture he no doubt considers exceedingly rude.

Hannibal smiles.

“You are blinder than I had thought.”

The front door opens and shuts out in the hallway. Paws come scrabbling down the stairs, accompanied by excited yips and barks.

Will is back.

Before she can really think about it she shoots from the chair and out of the drawing room. Hannibal is behind her, his long legs keeping pace even though he walks where she runs. When she turns to look at him there is a smile on his face, very slight, and his eyes are as warm as she has ever seen them.

Will stands right inside the door, setting a hold-all on the floor, crowded by the dogs. She is pleased to see him, she realises. The balance of this house has been askew without him, he is needed here.

Her steps slow though, as she gets closer to him. Then she stops entirely. He looks... *sated*. Heavy lidded, lazy movements, at ease. Relaxed. Like...like he's just been fucking. She dismisses the notion immediately, on sure instinct, because it doesn't feel right, because it's something else, it's...

Unnerved and shaken and reaching reaching *reaching* for an answer she takes a step back, into Hannibal. Her front to his back, his chin on her crown. Something inside her shifts out of place and then back into a different one when his hand lands on her hip.

“You've been killing,” she blurts to Will just as soon as the conviction takes hold of her, no filter, no hesitation.

“Yes,” says Will immediately. Behind her Hannibal hums, and she gets the sense that he is pleased with them both.

“Welcome home, Will,” he says.

Chapter End Notes

Bit of a quiet one, but I need to get Clarice where I want her. Also, this was an awful chapter to write. Just awful. Send candy.

notes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Typhoid and Swans

Chapter 12: notes

It is, she thinks, hard to find somewhere to hide when you are a captive. Especially when your usual refuges belong to the very man you are trying to hide from.

And so she has ended up in the empty bathtub in her bathroom. It's the best she can do.

She sits with her legs drawn tight up against her chest and her head buried in her knees. Arms wrapped around herself. A tight little ball of tattered nerves and confusion.

The pose might be childish, but childlike is the betrayal she feels, and visceral in its intensity,

She feels foolish for feeling this way, though, and foolish for running within the confines of her own prison. She is a grown woman, a hard boiled FBI agent, and she knows damn well that Will has killed before, and quite deliberately too.

It doesn't change how she feels though, even if she can't quite sort through the kinks and knots of her thought strands. Let alone her emotions. All she has got left are her instincts, and she is beginning to fear that those very instincts are deceiving her.

Betrays all around, she thinks bitterly.

It doesn't take him long to come for her.

No doubt Will Graham knows that she wishes to be alone, but in this instance he does not intend to show her his usual sharp-edged kindness.

She can hear the door to her room open and close, and the steps that she knows belong to him cross the floor and then enter the bathroom. By now she would recognize them anywhere.

He doesn't say anything though. Not at first.

Instead she hears him sitting down on the floor right next to the tub. Stubbornly she keeps her head buried, like a child believing itself safely hidden behind tightly closed eyes. Now there is only porcelain separating them, which is apt, because she feels as cracked and fragile as a bone china cup.

Will they drop her, she wonders, just to see how she shatters against the floor?

Will just sits there, and she is having to stop herself from curling up inside his breaths, floating safe and sound inside danger. Habits, she thinks, as deceitful as everything else around here.

Eventually though, he sighs.

“It surprises me that you are surprised, Clarice.”

She doesn’t answer, tries to burrow deeper into herself. He sighs again, deeper, and vaguely she feels bad for making him feel like this.

“Are you going to tell me that I knew what I was getting myself into?” she whispers into cashmere and silk. “Because I didn’t get myself into this. *You* did.”

A slight shuffle to her right, as Will shifts position. She gets the sense that he is even closer now, that he is leaning against the tub.

“But now you are here. With us. And part of living... part of *being* with us, is acceptance.” And his voice lowers, becoming something like a whisper wrapped in a sigh. “Accept us.”

She shivers with the echo, with this acute little realisation that Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham indeed are conjoined in the ways that matter. That while they may plot apart, their strategies come together in the end.

“Tell me,” she says to her knees, and Will, he understands.

“He deserved it,” he answers. “He was a very bad man. Did unspeakable things to many.”

“What did he do?” she whispers, thinking of what Hannibal himself has done to many. *Is* doing. “How do you justify this? I’m curious.”

“Does it really matter?” he asks, and just like that she can feel his hand brush one of hers, just slightly, then gone. “If you knew the horrors I see. Hear. Real ghosts trapped in my head, banging with fists against the bones of my skull to be let out. Kicking against my orbital bones. Sometimes... sometimes looking out of my eyes. The screams and the breaking of bones and the ripping of skin and evil, the darkness. All inside me.”

She releases that she has raised her head and is looking at him. He is sitting up against the tub, mirroring her pose, knees drawn against his chest and arms loosely wrapped around them. He is staring straight ahead.

“I see as a pendulum. Did you know? A pendulum going the wrong way, swinging back time in the most violent way. Unearthing...everything.” He shakes his head. “Reasoning, sickness, intent, murder murder murder.”

“All the time?” she asks on an exhale.

He turns to her. He looks together, hair swept back, beard neat, and still with that satiated denseness in his eyes. He doesn't look contrite or conflicted, she thinks; he looks quite fulfilled.

"Yes. But it's easier with Hannibal. Because I allow myself to do something about it. Something real. Something concrete. Something *final*."

She reaches out, puts her hand on his, and he immediately twines his fingers around hers. She thinks she does it to reassure herself that he is human.

"And because you *like* it."

He stills entirely. His eyes on her feels like Hannibal's knife against her throat, and yes, never has he looked so like Hannibal; she understands very clearly why they are together.

"Yes," he says, and he doesn't quantify it beyond that, doesn't make apologies and she supposes she can appreciate that.

Perhaps she ought to scream at him. Hurl truths about needing to act within the law, about the danger of vigilantism, about the abhorrence in thinking oneself the judge of life and death; hurl it all him.

But those are blunt projectiles, aren't they, toothless and inefficient, and so she doesn't. It would make no difference. She can see it quite plainly. Because he is decided, and he is happy, and she wants him to be.

And how many times has she and her colleagues in law enforcement been left demoralised and frustrated and furious by guilty people getting away? How they have wrenched against their own back-tied hands, how they have fought against bureaucracy and, well, the law. How can she rail against him, when on a fundamental level she understands him perfectly?

And Will, he used to be one of them, but *more*.

Jack Crawford, she thinks, really fucked this up.

Gently she disentangles her fingers from Will's grip, then stands and climbs out of the tub. Walks straight past him out of the bathroom.

"Hannibal."

She isn't allowed on the ground floor outside meal times and drawing room times, of course. All the same she is down here, following music to a door just beyond the dining room.

She opens it without knocking.

It's a music room. Beautiful. Intricate panelling on walls and ceiling, tactile furnishings, the lighting deliberate and warm. Along one wall stands a theremin, its cabinet of mahogany and

bakelite. Violins hang on the wall alongside it, intricate wooden music stands beneath. Against the other wall stands a harpsichord, and a harp. Both, as far as she can tell, antique.

Hannibal sits with his back to her, playing on a grand piano. The piano faces a floor to ceiling window, taking up the entire far wall. It is dark outside, but the patio lights throw illumination across flagstones and snow, trees far beyond, made snarled and sharp by the play of dark and almost-light.

For a second she thinks she sees antlers move among the branches out there, then she begins walking across the floor towards Hannibal, naked toes burrowing into the plush rug with each step.

Hannibal must know she is there, of course, but he keeps playing, strong shoulders moving slightly as he touches down on the keys. Music like wraiths trapped between the bones of her skull. Beauty and despair and wings beating against glass.

She could weep.

Silently she sits down next to him on the bench, slides alongside him so that their sides touch, their shoulders, their thighs. Hannibal plays, and she nearly loses herself in the way his fingers manipulate the ivory keys. Sensual and teasing and brokering no arguments, his control absolute.

“Will is a killer too,” she says, and she feels foolish once again, because how can she feel surprised and betrayed? She had seen the aftermath of the killing of Francis Dolarhyde. She knows what he had done to Randall Tier.

The music carries on. She can’t name the composition, and suspect it is one of Hannibal’s own.

“Will kill bad people,” he answers, voice as even as always, his sharp accent softened by the music around it. “That is his choice, his way of making sense of and direct the darkness within him. I accept that, and I encourage it.”

“But you hope that one day he won’t be quite so discerning. Don’t you?”

“Yes.”

She can feel him along her entire left side, the warmth, the incredible mortal strength of him. The muscles in his leg, his arm, and the grace. She wonders what *his* heart would feel like beating against hers.

“You feel wounded by something that you already knew to be true,” Hannibal carries on. “By something you cannot change, and should not change. Acceptance, Clarice, is hard for you right now, isn’t it? Is it the deliberate nature of Will’s acts that you object to?”

She stays silent, and she thinks. Is it? Yes, perhaps. The premeditation, the lack of hesitation. And the unbridled gratification, the pleasure and the joy. Yes, perhaps that is it.

It makes her feel even more foolish. What is the difference, after all, between murder and murder? The death is inevitable no matter the intent behind the act. Is she really so naive?

She laughs, just a little. She doesn't want to lose herself, she intends to fight it, but if it's to happen regardless she wants it to happen with her eyes wide open.

"We haven't played quid pro quo for a while."

Hannibal plays. She can't take her eyes from his fingers. They touch the keys with the same sort of fluid elegance with which she imagines that he kills.

"Would you like to do so now, Clarice?"

"Yes," she whispers, and she means it.

"Very well. Why don't you start?"

Immediate, and with no hesitation:

"Why did you eat your sister?"

The music keeps coming, and she is watching Hannibal, his cruel profile. The shadows on his face do not move with her question.

"Because I loved her very much."

There is a follow up question here, of course, but she can't bring herself to ask it. Can't. She will, one day, no matter what might happen. But not yet.

"My turn," says Hannibal, then carries on quite mercilessly, reluctant to give her breathing room: "Have you ever had a true relationship, one that moved you. Committed and riveting and beautiful and ugly. A lover that seared him or herself into your very marrow until you took each other's brains hostage. So intense, so all consuming, that in the morning you would wake wearing each other's face."

She can't hear any question marks, because there is no question. Hannibal already believes himself to know. And as such, he doesn't wait for her to say no, but carries on:

"We have spoken about your father. What happened to the night watchman. It was a crippling betrayal, his departure, wasn't it, Clarice? And your relationship with men has been fraught since. Especially powerful men. You look to them for leadership and praise, to sit on their laps for comfort and affirmation."

Her breath hitches and she burns hot. Surely he can feel how hot she is through their clothes, surely he can hear her breathing change, surely he can *smell* her. But he continues playing the piano, and he continues unmaking her so that he can remake her.

"Or you clash with them, fight them as they attempt to undo you and take your accomplishments away from you. Like this Mr Krendler. Tell me, Clarice," and here comes his real question, what he truly wants. "- do you hate Paul Krendler?"

“Yes,” she says, and her voice is firm. “I do. I hate him.”

It is true, it is. Even now she feels it burn her, the anger and revulsion over how that long-necked scavenger had taken everything she had worked for away from her. Belittled her, sneered at her, and quite casually too. Because he could. Shits and giggles and *spite*.

“Very good, Clarice. Your turn.”

That’s not the end of it. She knows that is not the end of it. But it is all for now. She takes a breath.

“Out in the woods you said that Mischa didn’t *make* you. What did you mean?”

She can see him smile a little in profile.

“It seems, Clarice, that you have now reached a stage where you are trying to find patterns and reasons in us. Designs. Nature, nurture and you trying to figure out how we came to be. You are trying to find justifications, because if something, perhaps a great tragedy, perhaps an unspeakable act of evil, *forced* us into becoming what we are today, then maybe you aren’t a bad person for...feeling drawn to us both.”

She can feel herself break out in goosebumps despite her warm clothes, despite the warmth of Hannibal pressed against her side.

“I will not speak for Will, because Will is perfectly capable of speaking for himself. As for me...”

He looks at her, for the first time since she entered this room and sat down next to him. He keeps handling the keys with precise passion, and his pupils are black holes independent of gravity, his pulse beating leisurely on the side of his neck.

“*Nothing* happened to me. *I* happened.”

“And now you have happened to *me*,” she breathes. “You and Will, you have happened to me.”

“But will we change you? Will you allow it, or will you persist in remaining true to your antique morals and ideals?”

“Why not both?”

She tears herself from his eyes, looks back down on his hands. There are specks of red on his otherwise immaculate white cuffs. Blood. She’s pretty sure.

“I am not sure that is possible yet,” he answers, unruffled, lethal.

“Do you think of me as something breakable, or malleable, Hannibal? Silver...iron...metals that can be manipulated, worked into becoming something else entirely, no matter how stable they may seem.”

“I must confess, Clarice, that I do not know. Not yet.”

But he knows, she can tell that he thinks he knows.

She can tell that he is *sure*.

She draws a deep breath, gathers all the loose strands of her back together. A cumbersome task, and she isn't sure that she is up to it, that she is successful.

“Thank you, Hannibal,” she says. “This has been helpful.”

She isn't sure she's telling the truth. It had been disjointed, with no discernible red thread. It had rattled her terribly, made her feel hot and scared and seen. No doubt that had been his intention.

“I'm glad.”

The look he gives her penetrates muscles and sinews, but she smiles at him all the same. Her face hurts. He keeps playing, and the music winds about the strands of her hair and burrows deep into her amygdala.

She goes to find Will. One last try, one more attempt. She owes herself that much, before she bows down.

He is in his bedroom. He sits by his desk, barefoot and in a white undershirt, with soft pyjama pants. His bag stands unpacked on the floor, and he's finishing off a lure, getting ready for bed.

“Did you talk to Hannibal?” he asks her without turning his head, and she stops in the doorway, hovering, suddenly uncertain. Then she makes up her mind, takes a deep breath and walks into the room. Crosses the floor to the bed and sits down on it.

“Yes.”

Will finishes the lure, puts it on the desk then turns the chair around to face her. Elbows on his knees, fingers clutched under his chin. She looks at the pronounced dips and peaks of his lips as he forms them around one word:

“And?”

There is perhaps half a yard separating them, but it feels like nothing, the air filled with shapes and words and thoughts she can't ably identify. From here she could reach out and touch his face, his brow, his midnight thoughts. That's all that matters.

She shakes her head.

“Can I tell you something awful?”

“All sorrows can be borne if you put them in a story,” he smiles at her, and there is wryness in that smile. “Someone once told me that.”

“Is that what you’re doing?” she asks. “Are you weaving stories to contain all that you are? What you have become? What you feel?”

“That is what we *all* do, Clarice. It’s just that some of us are better at it than others.”

“You chose your own story, didn’t you.”

He looks solemn, and she leans forward towards him, just a little closer, thinking that finally she can name the colour of his eyes.

But she can’t.

“Eventually I did, yes. I have never known myself better than when I am with Hannibal. So I stopped fighting it. You know that. I told you.”

“Yes,” she murmurs. “You chose your story, and you told it to me.”

He leans forward, and with one finger he strokes across the top of her hand.

“Now you tell me. Tell me.”

It is her turn wrapping her fingers around his, but it is him holding on.

“You make me feel safe.” She has told him before, of course, but she had been near death and lost in herself. Now she feels the need to tell him that it’s still *true*. “You make me feel safe, and I don’t think I’ve felt truly that way before. And I hate that. I know what is happening, and I hate that I know but can’t do anything about it. That you’ve made yourself my safety without asking me for my permission.”

She is crying, she realises, tears running down her face. She flicks her tongue out to catch their saltiness as they flow past her mouth, and Will follows the movement.

“I used to sleep in the laundry room. Sometimes that would be the only place I *could* fall asleep.”

Will nods, like he truly understands. She thinks perhaps he does.

“With the rhythm of the washing machine like a large beating heart, and the rush of water like what the unborn hear. The last memory of peace,” he says quietly.

“Perhaps.” Then: “Now you have become that lullaby. Your breaths. I haven’t slept properly for a very long time. I have always had problems sleeping, but recently....” she cuts herself off, shakes her head. “Here, I’ve...” She struggles to explain, but really, she thinks that he understands. “Of course, that’s hardly strange, is it. But in that cabin, with you, I...Nearness. Touch. Isn’t that almost horrific? That I slept so well with you? In you? And now I...”

“Clarice,” he cuts her off, and his voice is even and blank and so very quiet. A raspy whisper. “Would you like to sleep in here tonight, with me? Is that what you are trying to say?”

“Yes,” she breathes, relief and trepidation and, and... “Your breaths are like the beating heart of the machine.”

Will just nods, like this is nothing strange, like the captive begging the captor to share his bed makes perfect sense.

“Of course you can. You need never ask. Just lay down.”

And she does, she pulls down the plaid cover and she slides underneath, curls up. The whole bed smells of Will, and she sinks into it, rubs her face against the pillows despite herself. She blinks against the flow of calm that washes over her, because she hadn’t lied to him, this is true, and *that* is why she must try one more time. Because it’s *true*.

She yawns, and shakes herself slightly under the covers. She must be alert.

Will walks around the room turning off lights, and she watches as he becomes more and more soluble in the dusky half light of the room. Until he is a silhouette, and then part of the shadows.

She feels the bed dip where he sits on it, then even more as he slides under the cover.

With her.

He scoots across the mattress, and gently he gathers her in his arms. His front to her back, one arm around her middle, and one underneath her neck, and oh, how good she feels, how utterly horrifically *good*. She breathes, and he breathes, and she can feel herself begin to float, lulled and held and imprisoned. She can feel his mouth in her long hair, the wiry strength in his arms around her, and he is dangerous and he is safe and he is...

She must act now, but there is tinnitus in her heart. She can’t. She fidgets slightly, and his arms tighten around her, a reproach to keep still. She does as he silently suggests, but everything is rushing within her, and he can feel it.

“Turn around,” whispers Will, and she obeys. She turns around, and he releases her and scoots back a little, as if he can see her face through the dark. She tries to see him, but can’t, can only feel a finger stroke down her temple, as if trying to soothe and tame the wild thoughts trapped beneath.

“Relax,” he whispers. “I’m here.”

Yes. He is. He is here.

It is her moving towards him. It’s absolutely, unquestionably her, the decision crystal clear in her mind, the slide into him one of pure agency.

Her movement, *her* feelings.

But when her lips touch his, she knows without a shadow of a doubt that this is Will Graham's design.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter brought to you by, to my own great surprise, Pearl Jam Unplugged 1993. Fuck me, Vedder's voice.

A couple of the lines in Hannibal's speech about a true relationship is borrowed/paraphrased from Ted Hughes' poem 'Lovesong'.

"All sorrows can be borne if you put them in a story" is by Danish author Karin Blixen and in 'Hannibal' Chiyo says it to Will.

"Nothing happened to me. I happened," is something Hannibal tells Clarice in SotL, and Bedelia in 'Hannibal'.

The washing machine-as-sleeping-aid thing is from SotL.

whispers

Chapter Notes

Spot the Bukowski reference.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Typhoid and Swans

Chapter 13: whispers

He tastes of yew and snow and opaque darkness. He tastes *good*, irresistible, and he feels so warm even though he brings winter.

They are close. Too close, but not close enough. Chest to chest, and his arms are wrapped about her and his thigh is thrown over her leg as he ties her to him. Holds her in permanence. He tilts his head so that he may slant his lips closer to hers, and she tastes his tongue for the first time. She moans into his mouth, and he hums into hers, and the acoustics of their emotions become trapped in skull bone. There is an enormousness to it; how she feels. The overwhelming sensation of having Will Graham trying to step inside her skin.

“I don’t have it on me,” he whispers and gently traps her lower lip between his teeth.

“Hmm?” she murmurs and arches her back, just a little, because how wonderful it would feel to have his heart knocking on the door of hers.

“The car key,” he says and finds her pulse point, lines up her heartbeats on his tongue instead.

Trying to step inside her skin, yes, but he is already comfortably and unobtrusively nestled in her mind.

“Oh,” she says, and cards her fingers through his hair. It’s so tactile. She wants to kiss him again.

Then she sighs and pulls back, and he lets her, but he’s not relinquishing her entirely. There is a hand on her waist and his breath on her forehead and brow.

“You can still stay the night if you want,” he offers, kindly refraining from pointing out the way she had entirely forgotten her goal. “I will hold you.”

“Yes please,” she murmurs, and burns her pride to cinders.

Will turns her within the net of his arms, so that she is tucked into him. Her back against his chest and her head underneath his chin again. She feels enclosed and trapped, and ensconced in familiarity, because this is how they were in the cabin. This is how she relearnt touch again, and now she realises how she has missed it, that she must have it or fade.

“What are you thinking?” asks Will into her hair.

“How I told myself that this would be my last attempt,” she whispers, and something breaks apart deep inside her. She wonders if something new and tender will grow out of the chasm, like the first golds of spring, or if it will simply grow wider and wider and swallow her whole.

“And then?”

“And then...and then...” She’s not crying. Perhaps she is too tired. “Then I would stop trying.”

His hand moves up to cup her left breast.

There is nothing carnal about it. It seems he simply wants to make a bowl for her heart. And how safe it feels, she thinks hazily, how good it is to exist in the palm of someone’s hand.

His lips moving against the back of her neck:

“It’s a relief, isn’t it? To stop trying.”

She nods out into the darkness.

“Yes,” she whispers. “I think so. But it might end me.”

“I won’t let it.”

Her heart beats against his hand, so hard and so fast. He holds the beats as gently as he would a fledgling bluebird, but there is still a sense of ownership. Of mastery. Like he is intimately familiar with the newborn crack in her and intends to nurture its growth.

She supposes she can understand that. After all, his own breakthrough came from being broken.

It would seem he wants the same for her.

She is so tired now, her eyelids as heavy as the world sliding off her shoulders. But it is important that she tells him something.

“You do make me feel safe. I didn’t lie.”

“I know you didn’t.”

She puts her own hand on top of his and falls asleep.

It's only the second time she has woken in his arms, but somehow it seems like an ancient thing. Like it has always been like this, and always will be. As if her body has found its defeat and its path in sleep, even if her mind has not.

She is pretty certain that Will is awake, his heart beating too fast against her back to be at true rest. But she doesn't want to move. She feels safe, even though she isn't, and she feels warm and cocooned. Will's hand is still on her left breast, and her nipple is hard against his palm.

She makes a very small movement, chasing friction against callouses and warmth. Will cups her breast just a little harder, but makes no move. Waiting for her.

She opens her eyes, squints against the grey morning light. More illumination than she had expected. True spring might still be some time away in this dark arctic place, but light runs ahead of it. So too, perhaps, new beginnings. She looks around.

In the chair next to the bed sits Hannibal, watching them both.

When he sees her looking at him he smiles, just a little.

"You look like you feel very safe, Clarice."

She stays still. Will must know that Hannibal is here, and he must accept it. That means that she ought to do the same.

"Yes," is all she says.

"I'm glad. You feeling secure is important to us," he says, as if he has not politely threatened to kill her several times.

Will lets go of her breast and sits up. When she glances back he is stretching. His hair is tousled, his eyes heavy with sleep but still alert. He looks rumpled and content.

By contrast, Hannibal is looking impeccable in a cashmere sweater and wool slacks, hair fastidiously tidy. He might be slightly out of place in this room, in this situation, but the way he looks at Will is suffused with such exquisite sharp fondness that her heart stutters on a beat.

And there and then, sitting in the residual warmth of Will, Clarice thinks that she would like Hannibal to look at her the same way.

"Can we walk?"

It is afternoon, and she hasn't seen Will all day. Not since waking up next to him, no, *within* him, this morning. Now she is feeling abandoned and maybe-chastised, and like he hadn't meant it when he assured her that he wouldn't let her...fall. Break. End. Vanish.

Like he is angry that she tried to deceive him.

It is not unusual that Will makes himself scarce - she has had solo breakfasts and lunches with Hannibal before - but today it is truly unsettling. He should be here, with her. He should hold her in his hand, he should keep her together. He should make her feel more like herself since before she arrived here. He should make her feel safe.

He should keep his fucking promises.

His absence makes her feel antsy and uncontained, desperate for air and vistas beyond this big house. That's why she is standing here in the drawing room, suggesting to Hannibal that they go outside instead of sitting opposite each other in hideously expensive Leif Jacobsen chairs.

And he agrees.

"Of course, Clarice," he says with a polite nod that she doesn't trust at all. "Fresh air would be beneficial, I feel. We can talk just as well as we walk."

And he beckons her ahead of him into the mud room, and they dress for winter and chill. She calls the dogs, and they step outside.

Immediately she sticks her nose in the air and inhales deeply. Can she smell spring, she wonders, over the scents of snow and wind?

She can't, but she thinks she might be able to soon.

Hannibal at her side, effortless and strangely at home in this landscape, even though he doesn't belong here as easily as Will. Even now, walking with her and the dogs in the middle of nowhere, he is dressed in only the finest, most expensive garments.

He sees her looking at his Patek Philippe, visible in flashes between the sleeve of his goose down parka and the edge of his calfskin glove.

"You like fine things, don't you? I can tell that you recognize them for their worth. Furniture, couture, jewels...you know them. And you suit them. You moved like a queen in the dress I gave you, a garment that might be cut too severe for many women."

She sees no use in pretence or artifice. She is in a different place now, with both Hannibal and Will, and if nothing else, she feels she can be who she is with the dark and the light.

"Yes." And then, because she is beginning to truly know and perhaps sometimes predict him, she preempts: "Because I was always poor."

"Tell me about the orphanage," he segues.

She shrugs a little, and steers them into the woods at the back of the property. She likes it there, the quiet, the ghosts, the nearness to the stag. Because it is *close* here, the beast, between trees and among shadows. She feels it, she sees it when she isn't looking.

“Lutheran,” she says eventually. “I didn’t mind it, I guess. Rules and rigid structures. As long as you understood the rules, and toed within the structure, you were fine.”

“And you have felt at home in institutional structures ever since, haven’t you? At least until one such structure chewed you up and spat you out, uncaring of your sacrifices and your devotion.”

Hannibal moves closer to her, and she can tell by the shape of his nostrils that he is scented to that chasm inside her, that he has his fingers wedged inside it just as much as Will.

“Last night we spoke of hate and acceptance. You told me you hate Mr Krendler. I - and Will - one again urged you to accept us. Now I ask you to not only accept us, but also yourself. Accept your hate. Breathe it. This man ruined you. Own your emotions. Harness them. Remember what they feel and taste and smell and sound like. Roll them on your tongue, clench them in your fists. Make them yours. Don’t forget them.”

“I won’t,” she says, quite clearly. “I promise.”

“Good. And I want you to consider this: Paul Krendler betrayed you. Your father left you. Your mother gave you up. Jack Crawford left you.” He tucks a long, strong finger underneath her chin, lifts her face to meet his eyes in the darkness of the dusk. His eyes glow. “We won’t leave you.”

“You repeat this as if I will come to believe it with repetition.”

“Because it works. And because it is true.”

She considers for a second, then she takes off running from beneath his hand.

Hannibal makes no move to stop her.

She runs with the dogs by her side, up, up the steep slope, in between the trees. Arms and legs pumping, heart beating fast fast fast, iron and copper on her tongue. *Running*, yes, and she is sure that the stag runs along with her, she can sense it far off to her side.

She is smiling.

She has forgotten what it is to run. The movement, repetitive and hypnotic. Breathing her way to that singular, shivering place between pain and pleasure and mind soaring elsewhere. She runs until she is painfully reminded that she has been forced into sentience for too long now, until her lungs protest and her legs shake.

Then she stops, turns around, and returns back down the slope to Hannibal.

He stands still and watches her come.

She feels like she is flying, so steeply does the slope bow. Her hair is streaming behind her and she is kicking up snow and pine needles.

She is still smiling when she returns to Hannibal's side. His eyes are dark, hot, inscrutable, the lines of his face locked in a strange sort of concentration.

"I will remember this," he says slowly as she breathes fluttering frost into his face. "I will keepsake the memory of you running, Clarice, I will store it safely always." And then: "You miss Will."

She stays still, looking at him, enjoying the sounds and the smells of these freezing woods.

"Is he mine to miss?"

"Of course he is," Hannibal says, and then begins walking again, but not back to the house. "Let us go further in among the trees. Even now you can find patches of naked ground, untouched by snow, if the trees are deep and close enough."

She follows him, deeper into darkness and shade and the scents of frozen resin and iron.

"Will is not gone, though, is he?" she says. "He is just distant after being... close."

"You can miss a person even if that person is standing right before you," Hannibal replies. "But it is reassurance you want, isn't it?"

"Yes," she admits.

"Will is yours to miss. You have both made it so, and I am glad."

"Why?"

"It pleases me to see you grow close."

"That makes me feel suspicious."

"A waste of an emotion."

"Why? Why do you want us to be close?"

She gets no answer, and she turns to look at him.

He has stopped.

She looks around. They are in a tiny glade, the trees around them latticing their branches together in such a way that no light can penetrate. The dark is deep and tactile here, so much so that she struggles to see that Hannibal is right: there are indeed patches of bare ground, white snow alternating with moss in deepest darkest green.

Hannibal is leaning against the trunk of a large ponderosa, arms crossed over his chest, head back against the bark, eyes half closed.

"Tell me, Clarice, what happened between you and Will last night... would you like it to happen again?"

She sees his face only in sharp lines of chiaroscuro, and she wonders how his eyes can reflect light when there is no light here at all.

“Which part?” she hedges.

Hannibal only raises a brow. She can see it because the shadows on his face shift, ever so slightly.

“The part that shook you. I can see, you know. I can see your anxiety, your restiveness, your...excitement. Tell me.”

“We kissed, and I told Will that he makes me feel safe, and I meant it.”

“Meant which part?”

“Both,” she says. “You are pouncing now, aren’t you, when I am vulnerable.”

His voice, when it comes out of the darkness, is faintly amused.

“Don’t fool yourself. You have been vulnerable all along. But now, now you are the *right* kind of vulnerable.”

She steps closer, all the way up to him. Puts a hand on his arm.

“Right kind of vulnerable for *what*? The way you spoke of your sister...do you see her in me? You said I reminded you of someone that was special to you. Did you mean Mischa?”

Underneath her hand his arm twitches, judders. She laughs, just a breath. Just a puff of air turning to frost before her face.

“I’m one of Jack’s, remember?”

“Indeed you were,” he says slowly, his use of past tense a cruel little dart. “And yes. I was thinking that perhaps the space you occupy could instead be inhabited by Mischa. That time may reverse and Mischa would become whole again, in your place.”

She starts, because this is certainly his truest threat yet. Where there is Mischa, there can be no Clarice, that much is clear. Hannibal would fail, of course, his efforts far beyond the scope of physics and time and life and death, but that wouldn’t help her if he actually tried to go through with it.

“Your equations,” she says quietly. “They are in the evidence locker at Quantico. From the night of your arrest in Wolf Trap. Is that what you were trying to do? Reverse time?”

“Yes,” he says, voice heavy. “For Abigail. For Will.”

“Too late for Abigail,” she says sharply, still tormented by the young girl’s plight.

“It wouldn’t have been,” he says, voice sharper even than hers, “- had Will made the right choice that first time. I did make time reverse. I did put Abigail back together again.”

“Does it even count,” she breathes, “- when it was you who first tore her apart?”

Hannibal’s hand comes up and wraps around her neck. Not hard, but it could become hard. Not threatening, but it could be so in a second. With one finger he strokes the side of her neck, rhythmically, over and over. He has taken his glove off, she notes as from a distance. His skin is warm against hers.

“I told you that I had my own reasons for bringing you here. That was one reason. That perhaps I could find a way to bring Mischa back. But I think I have abandoned that thought. I think I prefer you the way you are. And I want to see what you can become.”

His finger keeps stroking, and she leans into it, floating on the sensation of the rough pad of his finger dragging over her skin.

“You will remember the constellations I spoke of: you and Will. Will and I. You and I.”

With that a finger slides to her mouth and pushes between her lips just very briefly before returning to her neck again, beginning the rhythmic stroking anew.

“And you, and Will, and I.”

She sinks into him. Can feel his thighs against hers.

“Do you know, Clarice, sometimes I want to reach in under your ribs and remove your heart. Hold it in my hand, then bring it close to me. Touch it to my heart, and to Will’s. What do you think would happen if our three organs touched?”

“Fire,” whispers Clarice. “Fire.”

“Indeed. Your soul is the supermassive black hole at the centre of your own galaxy. Do you know what happens when galaxies collide?”

“Violence,” she answers. “Then, perhaps, they merge.”

“That is right.”

“But,” she begins haltingly, trying to regain herself, trying to come back from how his finger on her neck has made her fall inside of him. “If one galaxy is larger, the smaller galaxies will be torn apart. Swallowed by the larger one.”

She tries to meet his eyes through the dark.

“Stripped for parts.”

“I won’t let that happen,” he says, and the same promise on the same day from a different man.

She can’t see clearly even though her eyes are open, darkness all around, but she can feel his strokes, she can feel his breath on her face. And always, always not quite there: the stag.

“Why do you think I see it too?” she asks him, and she is yearning for a true answer. “The stag?”

“Who knows?” he says, far too lightly, batting the significance away in the heavy air. “You saw the crime scene photos. You followed in our tracks. It is not inconceivable that you’d share hallucinations with Will.”

“Bullshit,” she whispers. “Bullshit, *Dr Lecter*.” She notes his reaction to her being back to using his title and last name, they way his body stiffens against hers, but she doesn’t care. “It’s from you, isn’t it. The antlers, the feathers, the scales, the darkness. The waking dream. It’s all from you.”

He’s even closer, how can he be closer?

“You play with the notion of being of God, don’t you? You cast yourself in his image, kill just as nonchalantly as he does,” she says, voice hot and raspy. “But you are not from him, are you? Rather you are his opposite. The one cast out, and down. The curious one, the tempter.” She recalls the transcripts from Abel Gideon’s asylum interrogations. “*“He is smoke. He is the devil”*,” she quotes.

His smile is something awful, cutting through all her veins, and his eyes of crimson.

“One thing I do like in you over Will,” he says, “- is that you do not see stark realities the way he does, and so your imagination runs wilder.”

He is dismissing her notions, but she can see clear as day how the nothing-light throws shapes like thorny antlers on the trunk behind him.

“We should go back to the house,” she says, voice small.

“Indeed we should,” he answers.

She is going to bed, is in the corridor outside her room, when she sees Will again. He is coming up the back stairs, the ones she hurtled down during her first escape attempt, and he moves with silent purpose. He is alone, without the dogs, and there is a smudge of dirt on his cheek.

He nods and smiles when he sees her, and she gets a sense of mulch and soil, darkness and fear, iron and copper as he passes her by, the scents mingling and disturbing her.

But he is about to walk away again and she can’t let him.

“Will,” she says, and he stops, a few paces down, his back to her.

She takes a breath.

She’s doing this because she wants it, because she needs it, and she is ignoring how Hannibal’s marionette strings cut deep into her wrists and ankles.

“I really want to kiss you again,” she tells him.

Will turns around to face her, his arms hanging loosely by his side, fingers twitching.

“Come here then,” he says, and his eyes darken, and he looks serious and he looks triumphant.

Chapter End Notes

I’d say that from here on out it’ll be a little less of the talking and more of the doing.

firelight

Chapter Notes

A short chapter, but it needs to be contained like this, I think.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Typhoid and Swans

Chapter 14: firelight

He makes her come to him, and she *knows* it but still she goes.

When she reaches him he doesn't hesitate, not for a second. He kisses her, and it's a lot.

A *lot*.

It's more than last night. Much more. Then, he had indulged her little play. He had been kind and understanding and he had held her heartbeats safe.

Tonight he takes more than he gives, and all she can think is how his mouth and his tongue and his teeth already feel like home.

How strange and how predictable.

There exists a bright part of her though, a shining part, red and hard and faceted. It sees and knows precisely what is happening, and the why and the how. She holds on to it, keeps it safe, a garnet inside a tiny pocket in her heart, as she finds herself with her back against the panelled wall and Will Graham so close.

Chest to chest and thigh to thigh, and he is inside her mouth.

Kissing her and kissing her and kissing her; she can barely breathe.

His hands are cupping her face and the touch is soft but she can't move her head. His short beard is scratching her and it feels amazing, almost as good as the way his tongue moves against hers, as the way his breath moves past her mouth and down her throat to curl in her lungs like it belongs there.

He moves from her lips down to her neck, sucks on her pulse. She moans, no, she *whines*, and jerks her hips into his. She can feel him; he is so hard against her. And as his arms tighten

about her and his eyes go darker all she can think is that if he wants her then she is safe.

She is *safe*.

And she is burning. There is sweat beading like pearls on her brow, and she feels entirely present in her bones and skin and muscles and cells. She is right *here*, with Will, and every building block of her is aware, her corner stones aflame.

And she is safe.

“Your room,” she murmurs, because she is more comfortable in his than in her own, and they can’t stay here in this corridor.

“No, ” he says and tugs her hips into his, hard. “I want to see you in firelight, Clarice. Come.”

And he takes her hand and urges her along with him, and she follows. He leads her down the big stairs and across the hallway, their steps echoing, then into the dining room. It’s empty, but she stiffens all the same. Will doesn’t stop though, he carries on through, to a door opposite the one leading to the kitchen.

Into a large room she hasn’t been before.

More dark wood panelling. Floor to ceiling shelves along three walls, filled with books. Books high, high above her head. A group of beautifully worn Chesterfields surrounding a rough coffee table. An enormous fireplace burning low, the only light source. A large window black with night. Burgundy velvet and animal pelts.

Dark corners, moving shadows.

She sits down on one of the couches and watches him throw some more logs onto the fire, light some pillar candles on the mantle. Methodical, premeditated, and yet it doesn’t feel like something interrupted and awkward. It feels like... expectations. Expectations floating on the air in this room, dense and tactile, she could almost slide her hand along them. She leans her head back against the headrest and looks up at the intricately carved ceiling, the newly fed fire throwing shapes across it.

It feels a lot more comfortable and intimate here than the drawing room with its stiff Scandinavian furniture and unpleasant connotations. Yet this still does not feel like Will’s space. It feels...it feels...

She fidgets, conflicting instincts making her skin too tight. She is a creature of action and flight and now, when she is decided on her course, all she wants is to throw herself into it. *Needs* to, or the impotent, shackled urge to flee will grow excruciating.

This need, this impossible situation, makes her body feel heavy and limber and vigilant and secure, and her lips part and her eyelids half close when Will finally makes his way over. He sits down next to her and draws her near. Finds her lips again, and his hands bury deep in her hair. And she allows herself to sink into him, into his mouth, his body, wrap herself around

his tongue and his torso. They are within their own prism of illumination inside this dark room and it feels like nothing else, removed, faraway, and...

When he slips his hand underneath her top and brushes it lightly across her belly she hisses with the sting and the sensation.

“Ah, yes,” murmurs Will.

He slides onto the floor, kneels between her legs. He cradles her hips between his hands, rubs his thumbs in circles from hipbone to abdomen and back again, carefully avoiding the elements Hannibal carved into her skin. When she looks down into his face she finds his pupils expanding ever outwards, greedily swallowing all colour.

She will never establish the hue of his eyes. She realises that now.

“I find that I need you,” he says, voice low, raspy, stilted. “Will you let me have you?”

That clear red part of her doesn’t quite believe the demurral in his voice. Hesitant, that is not what he is anymore. It’s an affect, to steer her, guide her, *manipulate* her.

Right to him. Her into him. Him into her.

She sees it, and yet she follows the path he leads her on. What a true, cruel artist he is, she thinks, that he would have her see so clearly yet still want to come to him.

And she nods, and she pulls her soft cashmere top over her head.

That leaves her upper body in one of the bras provided by Hannibal. She can feel her nipples strain against the champagne silk, but Will’s attention is on her belly. The elements, her elements, so expertly and minutely carved into the tenderness of her skin. Hannibal has taken good care of his crimson Copperplate, but the elegant lines are still red and angry.

Fresh.

She watches as Will bends his head and slowly drags his tongue along each letter and sign. Again and again. Her hands find their way into his hair and she clings to the strands, tugs at them as his tongue teases forth blood. Then she slides them down to the curious fragility of his exposed neck, bowed and white. She considers squeezing, as hard as she can, until she can hear bones pop.

She settles for pushing his head closer into her.

Will looks up at her with that. His lips are red. He smiles, just a little. Then he bends back down and kisses his way out to her hip, pulls down the edge of her lounge pants so that he may properly lick that jutting sharpness of bone.

He is gentle. His touch is featherlight, his tongue is warm and her hold on him is firm. But she is in no doubt that it is him that leads. No doubt at all.

Not when he tugs at the waist of her trousers and softly encourages her to lift her hips so he can pull them down and off. Not when he ensures absolute eye contact as he unbuttons his shirt and shrugs it to the floor.

He is a sight. The light from fire and candles brush and sighs across his skin, pools in dips and hollows of bone and muscle, highlights hard angles and breathtaking leaps of sinew and pulls. And shadows, shadows paint him each time he moves, even if it's just a little. Even if it's just him leaning towards her.

A dusting of chest hair. A smatter of small freckles across his shoulder blades; she sees them and counts them and draws constellations between them as he bends again, nuzzles and kisses and nips his way up the shimmering soft road of her inner thighs.

He is trailing his tongue just along the silky edge of her underwear when she pulls him back by his hair.

“Not there. I don't want to.”

And Will looks at her, and she can see how her lie gets stuck in his throat.

“Are you sure?” he asks.

She is not sure. She feels as if she is dissolving into atoms in the uncertain light of this room. As if she slides among the shapes of illumination and the deep, impenetrable shadows. She can feel how fast her heart beats, how her blood is rushing and pooling and shivering and flowing. She feels sure her eyes are blown, that every inch of her is occupied by this, by him, this wretched and delightful dance of survival. But the thought of having him there, right *there*, with lips and tongue and taste buds, with molars and incisors...it makes her feel far too vulnerable. Exposed.

Opened.

“Yes. Not...not now,” she says, and hates how this tips the balance even more in his favour.

Because it is in his favour.

Because she wants to fall forward into the burnished oil spill of him, all the different shades of darkness and the dapples of light. She wants to live. She wants to be strong. She wants, somehow, to win.

Even if it is by their rules, in their world.

She pulls him up into her by his hair, and he comes willingly. Then she pushes him around so that he is sitting back, comfortably, so that his neck is against the headrest and she is on her knees on the sofa, between his legs.

“You have made me want you,” she says as she unbuttons him and unzips his fly. “Need you.”

It is his turn now to lift his hips, but she is not as delicate as he, and she pulls his underwear down right with his jeans.

His cock springs free. She runs her hand along it, then fists it. It's so hard and so soft, pulsing, alive, strong. And she dances along the sound his hiss makes, the way it unwinds into the room. Pleasure given an auditory shape, and her hips jerking against nothing.

She feels too empty.

"It has been easy for you, hasn't it, making yourself my home, because I have never truly had one," she says as she strokes him. Up and down, up and down. "Easy to make yourself my safety. All you had to do was being less fearsome than Hannibal, and making me want to come to you. Pulling and then pushing away and then pulling again.

She bends down and licks some wetness over his head and down his shaft, so that her hands may glide better and faster and just the right kind of harder. He wants to push himself deep into her mouth, she can tell, but she sits back up instead.

"Twisting and twisting and then bending me right so that I'll heal *wrong*."

She leans forward, just a little, and with her free hand she strokes a finger along the sharp dips and boughs of his upper lip, so defined, trails along the shape of her name as it is brought forth while resting on a sigh. He bucks hard into her fist.

"Yes, I see you, Will Graham. Perhaps as clearly as you believe you see me."

He smiles up at her, and pushes her hair back from her forehead, and his lips are bitten red by her blood. His hips keep working, keeps pushing his cock into her grip.

"You saw it, and you knew it, and yet you came to me."

He ploughs his hand into her hair at the back of her head, grabs it and uses it to hold her in such way that eye contact is beyond negotiation or choice. His other hand moves down to her underwear, and gently pulls the silk to the side and out of the way. One finger finds her, that little nub where all of her nerve-endings meet. He pushes, and circles and teases, and then trails down and dips inside her. Feels how ready she is, how wet, how warm.

"But are you sure?" he asks on her helpless gasp which sounds more like a sob. She doesn't let up on her grip, keeps her fist running up and down the length of him, and he, he adds a second finger.

Then a third. Pushes in and out, and she chokes on a whine.

"Yes," she pants out, her hips stuttering, jerking against his, her free hand digging into his shoulder. "I am sure. You have made sure of it."

He nods, and holding her underwear aside he helps her rise up, then down on him. Helps her *sink*, as he works his way inside with sharp little thrusts. There is a vein beating on his temple, and she licks it, and then she kisses him, deeply and sharply.

She can taste her blood on his lips and with that she falls all the way down.

Pelvis against pelvis and her hands clawing his shoulders.

“Move,” she whispers against his forehead, and he grabs her hips and *moves*. Up into her, hard, ensuring that with each stroke and thrust she falls further and further down. And she helps, rising up and then allowing gravity to pull her deeper and letting him touch places inside her she didn’t even know she had.

They keep gaining speed which is impossible, it can’t be maintained but she won’t allow anything else and neither will he. Push and pull, her hands scrabbling against the headrest for leverage, her thighs burning and her breath whistling through her lips. Will reclined but so impossibly hard, one hand tugging her hips the way he wants her to move, the other a shackle across her back so that she is entirely molded to him.

She hears a sound and looks over her shoulder, scared. She can see out of the window this way, can see antlers drawn in moonlight and chiaroscuro, see dark eyes reflecting the fire and *them*.

She bears down harder on Will, still looking out the window. Fucks herself on him, impales herself over and over.

With a sharp tug on her chin Will brings her back around to face him, then he explodes quietly, with a shaking sigh and his eyes growing wide. He pulls her harder into him, so hard it hurts, and she wails with her own implosion, unexpected and unwanted and eagerly received. She rests her forehead on his shoulder as he empties inside of her, as she clenches so hard around him that tendons stand clean out on his neck as he keeps thrusting.

Then it’s over, and it’s strangely blissful. She can see only white, can hear nothing but her own breaths inside her head, and she is still in danger but not in the same way as before. She rubs against him, some sort of base, primal instinct desiring to smell like him, and she mouths at his neck and circles her hips to milk the very last he has to give.

He breathes deeply, then he stands, still inside her, and with her legs wrapped around his waist, and his jeans and underwear around his ankles, he walks them over to the hearth. Sinks them down onto the animal pelts there.

Deer and bear and mountain lion.

He slides out of her, and rights her underwear, and kisses her breasts. Each nipple in turn, he licks, sucks, before he lies down beside her and tucks her head underneath his chin.

Naked skin against naked skin. His arms around her, so familiar like this, and the heat from the fire and his breaths. She floats on his exhalations and the flames, and she is so exhausted, depleted, all she wants is to rest.

She floats and sinks and can’t surface, and it’s a cruel relief.

She is almost asleep, Will's heartbeats working their way inside her ear until it is everything she knows. Even so, she hears the faintest sound, perhaps not even a sound, perhaps just her instincts stirring and stretching inside her worn mind.

She lifts her head from Will's chest, blinks against the firelight, casts her gaze around, tries to penetrate darkness.

And slowly she is able to unpick the threads of dusky gloom, and like an optical illusion exposed Hannibal emerges. She sees him sitting across the room in the furthest darkest corner, and he has wrapped the shadows lazily about himself. Legs crossed, fingers steeped under his chin. He is watching them, the light on their skin, their limbs entwined, and Will stirs beside her, meets Hannibal's gaze with a calm one of his own.

Hannibal smiles, and Will drags his lip across her shoulder, his hand closes over her hip.

"Sleep, Clarice."

She lets her head fall down again, eyelids flickering fretfully.

And Hannibal, his eyes burn crimson with delight.

She can see it as she falls asleep.

Chapter End Notes

That last bit was the first thing I wrote for this story.

Anyway, this was my attempt to write vanilla sex. Hey ho.

shadows in light

Chapter Notes

Hello hi. Life is mental at the moment and I know I owe some of you replies to your lovely, thoughtful comments. And I will get to it, I promise, as soon as I can. I don't deserve you lot ❤️

Typhoid and Swans

chapter 15: shadows in light

“You watched us.”

They are back in the drawing room, in the stiff Leif Jacobsens, and how she wishes they were walking together in the woods instead. The darkness there is comforting, a safe shroud she imagines might hide facial expressions and body language and unspoken things.

Though Hannibal, she thinks, can tidily veil things in the sharpest of lights.

Not a hair out of place, his clothing impeccable as usual: wool slacks and a silk shirt in maroon, buttoned all the way up. There is the merest shadow on his left temple, but somehow it doesn't mar; it compliments.

He's leaning back in his chair, but his long legs are stretched out in front of him so that she may anchor herself to him without effort, a kindness she perhaps does not want but is unable to turn down - one of her legs is nestled between his, and she can feel the warmth of him seeping into her calf and thigh. His face is entirely without expression, but that in itself provides enlightenment; so adept has she become at reading his small ticks and tells that the absence of them speaks too.

“I did,” he answers calmly, words crisp and sure and so very simple and small for something so unfathomably big.

“Did you like what you saw?”

“Very much. You were both beautiful.”

She takes a breath, then another. She wonders what she looks like to him. She wonders what she looks like to herself. Her past self, and her current.

She can feel Will inside her. Leaking out of her.

“I would like a mirror, please,” she tells him. She has come across no mirrors at all in the parts of the house she is allowed to go. She is sure that is by design.

He nods.

“Of course. After this.”

She inclines her head in thanks. Then:

“It was Will’s idea to go there. To that room.”

“I’m sure it was.”

There is nothing in his voice giving anything away. She hadn’t expected there to be.

“Did you both agree to... did you *plan* it, beforehand?”

She is trying to pinpoint how betrayed and hurt she ought to feel, even as she acknowledges to herself the ridiculousness of the notion. She is here against her will. Pouting over her captors’ methods and manipulations seems counterintuitive.

And she had made her own decision. She mustn’t ever lose track of that, or attempt to explain it away, warp it into something else. She knew what Will was doing, and she still went along with it. She made an active choice. Making active choices seems to her the best way to no longer be a captive, to no longer be at *mercy*, but rather...

She looks up, still waiting for her answer. Hannibal remains still and calm.

“Will and I... often we don’t need to talk. Ours is a silent communication, instinctive and deep.”

She understands what he is saying. She understands. And the implications, the machinations, the infernal manoeuvring...she will need time to unspool it all, and she thinks that they may not grant her that time.

She can make sure she is familiar with as many of the pieces as possible though.

And so:

“What Will and I did, would you like to do it, too?”

“Yes.”

She had expected it, of course, but still his immediate, unhesitant confirmation makes her feel vertiginous. But not in an unpleasant way, she realises with some surprise a second later. No, the rush, the threatening freefall, it is dark and seductive and beautiful.

Perhaps brutal.

Hannibal is leaning forward, the better to pick all this out of her eyes. She can feel the heat of him, the way his muscles move against hers, the brush of purpose. He doesn't have Will's dark empathy, no, perhaps he doesn't. But he has his own means of excavating and then finger-painting vivid, violent artworks with people's feelings and fears and dreams.

And even if he didn't, she thinks wryly, she is making it rather easy for him. She has gone beyond hiding. She has gone beyond trying. Now, she is just showing him what is there.

"With me," she asks, "- or with Will or with both of us?"

"Yes," says Hannibal again, and he doesn't need to clarify, again she *understands*.

"That's why..." she begins, shaking her head even as she feels his hands hard and warm on her thighs. "I am a bridge. A *means*. A road...to...to where you truly want to be."

He sighs, and she tries to track falsehoods in the acoustics.

"Perhaps that is how you began your inception in my mind, but now... We spoke of metamorphosis, Clarice."

She remembers. The letters on her belly sting with the recollection, and her face burns when she thinks of sitting on his lap. She shifts underneath his hands, and wonders if he is grounding her or tearing her apart.

"You are ever changing, and it's going faster and faster. But..." he tilts his head slightly and she doesn't believe his body language, "- you haven't lost yourself. Not entirely. Not completely. There remains a hard core deep within you. Bright and shiny."

"Do you wish for it to remain?"

She thinks of garnets, and she breathes the question into the air between them, but she doesn't want to see if the words cling to his lashes or lips.

And he doesn't answer anyway.

Slowly he glides his hands from her thighs and stands. Offers her his hand.

"Come," he says.

"Where are we going?"

"You wanted to see yourself. I'm taking you to a mirror."

She puts her hand in his - dry, warm, ferociously strong - and allows him to pull her to her feet and lead her out of the drawing room.

He doesn't let go of her hand.

He takes her to the far part of the ground floor, to what must be the east wing, and his room.

It's enormous, not that she's surprised.

There is a large bay made out of the floor to ceiling windows so ubiquitous to this house. It faces the front, with uninterrupted views down the winding drive, over the treetops and through to the valley below.

The room has dual aspects, running through the entirety of the wing, and there is another large window to the back, facing the grounds and the deep woods - what she has begun to think of as *her* woods - rising up high above the house.

The furniture and furnishings in here are dark and severe. Greens and blues, heavy woods and stern lines, but even so she thinks this room must be drowned in light in summer. Just running straight on through, unencumbered and brash. Air and light embracing Hannibal's heavy interior choices. She thinks it might be on purpose. She thinks he likes juxtapositions, is tickled by them.

He sees her looking back out of the front windows, and comes to stand next to her, joining her study of the view.

"I bore my captivity because it had to be born, because it held a purpose. But these days I like to see wide open spaces, and I like to have them easily accessible to me."

She nods. Vast space and exit routes: what Hannibal is drawn to now. Hardly strange, she thinks. She remembers the photos of his cell at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

Not strange at all.

She looks at him.

"If this house were to come under attack, the RCMP, Interpol, fucking mercenaries and hired guns...you know they wouldn't exactly come sauntering up the drive," she says. "You wouldn't know they were here until it was too late."

She doesn't know if she's right. Hannibal had, after all, successfully and with ease eluded the authorities his entire life. He had only been captured when he himself had willed it so.

"Perhaps," he answers with the slightest twitch to his mouth that she thinks might be a smile. He nods out at the unfettered view. "And yet this is a comfort to me."

And it is a comfort to her, to know that he is human enough to have been affected by his time in a cell. She wonders if he has bad dreams. She wonders if, for him, bad dreams are good dreams.

She wants to...she wants to *poke* him. And once again she finds that she wants to *know* him, even if nothing good can ever come of peering into that chasm.

"How does it feel," she asks anyway, "how does it feel to constantly live under the threat of capture and death? Is it worth it?"

His eyes harden, but his face takes on an expression of soft amusement.

“How did it feel, how did it feel to live under the thumb of a misogynist out to ruin your entire career? Was it worth it?”

She rears back a little, stunned and then chastising herself for feeling that way. This is not a new angle of his, it’s one that he has worried away at for some time now.

“It was hateful,” she says, because it’s what he wants to hear, and because it’s the truth. “It was abhorrent. I do hate him.”

It’s easier to say now, when Hannibal has shown her how. Easy to express her hatred for Paul Krendler. In fact, it is liberating, thrilling, and a relief, to vocalise and own the words. Mean them, let them roll around on her tongue. Taste them, before spitting them out so that Hannibal may taste them too.

And Hannibal, oh his nostrils flare delicately when he looks at her face. She can’t stand having no control over how much he sees, and so she looks away.

Looks around.

There is a large mirror across the room, beside the canopied bed. It is antique of course, frame ornate and standing on a trestle of walnut wood. She starts to make her way over to it, remembering why she is here, but Hannibal stops her with a hand on her arm.

“Do you remember what you looked like? Before?”

She opens her mouth to answer, then closes it again. She wants to say of course. Of course she remembers her own face.

But she doesn’t. Not really. Not *enough*.

She knows the colour of her own eyes. But she can’t remember what they look like. The exact nuance, or the shape of her eyelids. Her eyebrows, her lashes. And is her nose long or short? Her mouth, wide or narrow?

Her face was never that important to her, but now, when she can’t quite recall it, it becomes crucial to know.

She doesn’t answer, but Hannibal understands anyway.

“I thought so,” he says, and she is pretty certain he is pleased. “Come.”

And he puts his arms around her shoulders and walks her over to the mirror.

“Close your eyes”, he murmurs as they walk, and she obeys, closes her eyes and allows him to lead her through the soft, warm darkness behind her lids. Her steps shuffle slightly on the thick rug; his are soundless.

Then he stops, and so she stops. He moves to stand behind her, his hands on her shoulders. The stance is paternal, but the way his front burns against her back is not. She can feel the suggestion of his chin on her crown. She can feel his strong muscles against the wings of her shoulder blades.

She thinks of the night in the dining room. They have come some ways, haven't they?

She wonders if she has fought too little.

His hands move into her hair. Carefully he sweeps it back from her temples and gathers it on top of her head. Holds it there, and she knows that her face is entirely exposed. To the looking glass. To him.

And worst of all: to herself.

"Open your eyes," he says. "Look."

Again she obeys. She opens her eyes, and she looks.

The glass of the mirror conveys details sharply and vividly. It is not warped and faded and faraway like that of truly antique glass. Hannibal must have had it replaced.

And it shows too much.

"Are you the same, Clarice?"

She looks at her face. It is as she can vaguely recall. It *is* her face. But not. Everything seems more pronounced. There are shadows under the childish roundness of her cheeks. Her brows paint severe angles, her lips are drawn like a keen entreaty.

But still she knows it. She might never have cared much about it, but she knows it. It is, more or less, the face on her FBI badge.

More or less.

Because her eyes hold nothing that is familiar but the colour. They are changed, she can tell that they are changed. Deeper, darker, unfathomable. There is something...primitive curled far back in her gaze, something haunted, something...sated.

She rears back, but there is Hannibal and he is unmovable, so she only succeeds in pressing herself more firmly along the burning contours of him.

"I can't tell."

She answers his question belatedly, and she is not quite sure if she's answering it truthfully. Because, as she looks again, it seems unmistakable that the person looking back at her, with Hannibal's face drawn in sharp lines and shadows on her shoulder, is someone else.

"Can't you?"

His voice makes it clear what he believes of her answer, and slowly she shakes her head.

“No, I...I’m not the same. I can see it now. It’s my face but I’m not the same.”

Behind her Hannibal humms, and the sound tickles her exposed neck. He lets go of her hair, and it falls around her face in thick waves. His hands slide back down to her shoulders, his grip firm and unmistakable. He will not let her move.

“Tell me, Clarice, were there any part of you that considered leaving Catherine Martin in the well? Deep down in that hole, screaming vainly in the face of slaughter?”

His change of subject is discombobulating, startling, and her eyes are wide as she meets his in the mirror.

“What?”

Hannibal’s gaze is steady and penetrating in return.

“Leave her there. Like you left the lambs behind.”

“No.”

Her answer is immediate. She doesn’t need to think.

“No,” repeats Hannibal, as if he’s not surprised at all. “Because she was an innocent. Someone that must be saved. Because you couldn’t save the lambs.”

“Yes.”

“Of course. You know, Will would have understood the impulse, perhaps felt the urge. To leave her. Then, and now.”

“I don’t believe that,” she says, but she doesn’t believe herself as she speaks the words. She has seen some of what lives inside Will. That queer play between dappled light and dark. Is it shadows within light or the other way around? How carefully Will must balance. *Have* balanced.

Because she doesn’t think he is quite so careful about it any more.

“So you see, Clarice, that the shining core of you that we spoke about, it remains. You aren’t so fundamentally changed. You are still you. Not entirely lost. Just...lost enough.”

Something is moving underneath her skin, and she can’t tell what it is. Adrenaline, perhaps. Or kinetic energy. Terror, comprehension, elation, fight or flight. Gently she steps away from him, from underneath his hands, and he allows it. She needs distance, and she walks back towards the large windows facing the front.

“And that’s just what you like, isn’t it,” she throws over her shoulder. “That I am not so changed, not so far gone, that I am unable to tell. That you have changed me but I am still me, and I know it but am helpless to do anything about it. That is *delicious* to you.”

He follows her, but slowly, and he stops halfway across the floor. His movements are even more measured and economical than usual, careful not to spook her.

“You forget that it isn’t just me that has changed you. It could be argued that Will has changed you just as much, if not more.”

“It would be a false argument,” she says and turns her back to the windows, feeling the primal need to face him so that she may gauge his movements and intentions. “Will wouldn’t have changed me had it not been for *you*. And you, you might have left me my core to amuse yourself, but you have done your best to alter everything else.”

“A serious accusation,” he answers, looking faintly smug. Glorifying in his success, she thinks. She remembers the old case notes, how he had been described as lost in self congratulation. She sees that now, first hand.

“Well, I *am* in law enforcement,” she shrugs with a levity that is entirely false.

“Not any more, and you never will be again.”

He says it with utmost surety and finality, and she swallows. How fragile is her life. How enclosed in his hand. How very much he wants her to know.

She hates that.

“You rule over me, yet you want me to trust. You threaten, yet you want me to settle. You demand my honesty and loyalty, but may kill me in return. Tell me, Hannibal, how can you ever achieve your objective when you make me fear?”

She wonders if he can smell it with her confession. That she fears. Because, she sees him transform just like that. Right in front of her. The way his head lowers, the way his body becomes taut and keen. How he would prowl, scent, stalk if he wasn’t so motionless.

How he flows too smoothly from human to devil.

But he remains where he is as he speaks. Far too still, with words that fall and slam and roar like boulders down a mountainside, even though they are quiet and soft.

“I will promise you something, Clarice. Should I ever see the need or have the desire to kill you, you will remain oblivious. The end will come from nowhere, no warning, and it will be swift and compassionate. I will choose a moment in which you are happy, and carefree, and smiling. In return I want you to give yourself up. Is that fair?”

That is not fair, not at all, but it is a great gift from this man thriving on suffering and theatre.

“That is fair,” she whispers, and she is vibrating, shivering. The adrenaline and fear and excitement comes welling up, and her skin grows too tight to contain her.

“Good,” he says, voice gone low and dark. “Come to me.”

And she returns to him, and she looks at the patterns the shadows paint on his face, and she thinks that in this moment she need not fear death.

She stops right before him. He looks down on her, and his gluttony is plain to see.

“May I kiss you, Clarice?”

She jerks, twitches. Not at the question, but rather the rare misstep. Too fast, he’s going too fast.

“Would you be gentle?” she asks.

He eats up the one step she left between them. She feels the sharp slope of his hip bone against her belly.

“I’m only gentle when I have to pretend. I don’t want to pretend with you. I want you to see me just the way I am.”

She shudders. She feels warm, tight, expanding, contracting.

“No,” she whispers. “Not yet.”

He sighs, and he swipes a hand through his tidy hair, and she can tell how hard and how carefully he holds himself back. But he listens, and she feels a true frisson of excitement with the realisation that she might have actually managed to rile him.

“Did you really think I would say yes?”

“No,” he concedes. “I should have...”

“...realised it wouldn’t be quite that easy?”

She feels reckless, gleeful, high on the fact that she has managed to make him miscalculate. That she has burrowed under his skin, just a little. But maybe enough.

She could grow to feel comfortable there, she is sure.

Of course, Hannibal won’t let her hold even such a tenuous victory for long.

Slowly, with terrible intent, he raises a hand to her face. He cups her cheek, then slides his fingers into her hair, grasps it hard. It is all she can do not to try and tear out of his grip, turn and run towards the door.

If she did, she knows with startling, unwelcome surety, he would chase her.

Deliberately he brushes her hair aside, then leans down and nuzzles into her neck. Right above her carotid artery, and she doesn’t know if he will bite, she really doesn’t.

He refrains. He smells her instead, deeply. Then he speaks against her skin.

“Don’t try me, Clarice.”

Just before he withdraws she can feel his tongue flick out, fast, wetness and warmth against her pulse.

“You taste delicious,” he says, standing up straight again. Then, a polite nod. “You may leave.”

And she does, her tiny victory shoved rather firmly down her throat.

Will finds her on her way back to her room.

A hand sliding around her waist from behind, a chin resting on her shoulder. A smell of pines and blood and damp, closed spaces. Potent, ephemeral. Subtly but unmistakably wrong.

“Where have you been?” she asks, even as she allows herself to flow back into him, rest her head on his shoulder. Wrapped in each other, like this, with his other arm coming around her middle to encircle and enclose and his cheek against her temple. Safety and danger and her body growing used to it, and that’s the *pickle*, isn’t it?

Her heart hasn’t even slowed down from Hannibal yet.

“Right here,” answers Will, “I’ve been right here,” and just like that she realises that he too can lie with the truth.

She turns in his arms, meets his eyes, shows him as clear as she can that she knows that’s not all there is to it, that he is hiding things and Hannibal is hiding things, they are hiding things together and apart and she *knows*.

And she will find out, she tells him that too.

She tells him quietly, without words, because apparently her connection with Will runs as deep and true as does his with Hannibal. And he understands her just fine.

He kisses her.

He pushes her up against the wall, ornate woodwork digging uncomfortably into her back but she doesn’t care because he is kissing her. Deep and overwhelming, his hand hard on her jaw to keep her still for him. Nothing of the exploring tenderness from last night.

And she loves it.

Vaguely, hazily, she realises that she has been fearful that he would pretend like nothing, that what happened between them last night would account for no step forward. She had felt abandoned today, and lost, and she had missed him, and oh how *clever* he is, she thinks as they share every single breath of air between them. As he kisses her senseless and still, teeth grazing, tongue fluid and strong in her mouth, deep, like he would eat her alive but slowly.

So clever.

“I woke up alone,” she breathes when he stops too soon. “I didn’t like it.”

He rests his forehead against hers, and this close she can’t see if his smile is mocking or sad.

“You have woken up alone for most of your life, Clarice. What is one more day?”

What is one more day, indeed.

Too much, that’s what it is.

“I know why Hannibal wants me here now,” she murmurs, and thinks how terrifyingly easy and wrong and familiar this is. How they hold each other, stroke each other and talk to each other just so. Like *lovers*.

“Do you now,” answers Will into her hair. Then he moves down, and he nuzzles her neck, right where Hannibal did, and she wonders if he can taste the other man on her skin.

“Yes,” she says, sure. “He *wants* you in every way, and I will be the bridge between you.”

“*Will*,” he says clearly, “not *would*?”

She doesn’t answer his question. She has already told him without meaning to.

“Come to bed with me,” she says instead, because he is something like home and hearth now, and she sees him, and he has made sure that she is sure.

He just nods, and if he feels triumph he has the decency to hide it well.

He leads her up to the third floor.

fundaments

Typhoid and Swans

Chapter 16: fundamentals

Clarice wakes because it's light.

True light. Sunshine.

It is faint, of course, struggling to break through winter; the black and the grey. But she can feel the almost-warmth of it brush her eyelids, her lips, her forehead. And if she strains her ears she can hear birdsong. It's tentative, but true, made possible because up here they sleep level with treetops.

She keeps her eyes closed, simply feels and listens and thinks. Luxuriates in letting awareness trickle through drop by drop. Place herself, ground herself, remember herself.

There is Will's breath mingling with the faraway birdsong. His limbs over her, around her. There is skin on skin, warmth and safety and dismay. Her body limber and heavy, a pleasant ache deep inside. Lips tender, scalp tingling, the bruises blooming on hips and thighs as tactile as the petals of roses. She runs her hands over them, and she opens her eyes.

She had been right. It is true sunshine filtering through the windows. And the birdsong seems keener with her eyes open.

Will's arms are wrapped around her. She's got her nose pressed into the hollow of his throat.

She has slept in the arms of her captor, and found comfort and warmth in it. Again.

But she won't admonish herself. Hannibal would just love it.

Slowly, carefully, she untangles herself from Will, and turns to look at him in the warm, weak light. The stubble around the neat lines of his beard notwithstanding, he looks boyish in sleep. Mouth soft and relaxed, forehead smooth. It is his eyes giving him away, always, and they are closed now. Softly she runs a fingertip across first one lid, then the other. Will doesn't rouse, and she can feel his eyes move in dreams underneath her fingers.

Right between two heartbeats the notion hits her to press down, to force his eyes into his skull. Just as soon as the urge flashes into being it disappears again, and she leans back. Languidly she wonders if this is the sort of dark urge Hannibal had spoken about.

Probably. But more.

She stands, stretches, studies how the frail light plays on her pale skin. It could make it glow from within, if she'd let it.

But she won't.

She picks up Will's discarded shirt - green and black plaid, she imagines Hannibal would find it pleasing against her hair - and puts it on. Quietly she leaves the room, ignoring the chill against her bare legs. As she walks down the corridor towards the stairs, Will's dogs join up, shaggy bodies brushing against her calves and knees. She welcomes the warmth and the comfort, and absentmindedly scratches the ears of the largest mutt as she descends the stairs down into the hallway.

She is not trying to be quiet, she is not trying to be surreptitious. She doesn't think it's expected of her.

She neither hears nor sees Hannibal, but she finds an abandoned cup of coffee on the table in the dining room, cold, with a star sapphire pattern on the surface of the dark liquid. He's been awake a while, then. He must be somewhere around.

No matter. She's not hiding. She's not hiding what she is doing.

She looks around, the visuals of blood a velvet stain in her mind, the olfactory memory of dampness and darkness clear in her nose. A basement, perhaps. An outhouse.

Right here.

That's what he had said, wasn't it? Right here.

Well, "here" is still by large a mystery to her. Her knowledge of the house is ever expanding, of course, but the majority of it remains unexplored. They had seen to that, mercilessly limiting her range and her world until it has narrowed to a few rooms, endless snowy vistas, and them.

She supposes she can understand that. She would have done the same, had she been in their shoes.

She decides to start with the rooms beyond the kitchen. Hannibal's domain, even more so than the east wing. She remembers the blood on his cuffs as his elegant fingers manipulated the ivory keys of the grand piano. He had gone straight from meal preparation to dinner to the piano, hadn't he?

And he had probably worn an apron. So fastidious.

This is Hannibal's territory, yes, she thinks as she enters the kitchen for the very first time, but Will is as much a part. It's a joint operation, whatever it is they wish for her to find and see, she is sure of it.

She looks around. The kitchen is at odds with the rest of the house, clashing cantankerously with the Jacobean, the gothic and the mid century Scandinavian. In here, it is all severe lines and chrome and bright lights, sharp knives, mallets, copper pans. Barely any wood, and it's

all blinding. The tiled floor is cold against her bare feet as she moves across the large space. She had seen pictures of the interiors of his Chandler Square home in Baltimore. This kitchen resembles his old one greatly. She thinks that he has left much of the rest of this house as is, perhaps replacing only a few choice pieces of furniture. But in here, in this kitchen, he has somehow contrived to recreate what he once had. It is sterile and uncomfortable, despite the wealth and depth of colours from the fruits and vegetables and flowers artfully on display, despite the paintings on the walls and the old fashioned recipe box over to one side.

There stands a balancing siphon coffee maker on one of the counters. Pretty, elegant, wildly ostentatious. She touches a finger to the pipette.

Warm.

She is considering the three doors leading away from the kitchen when she hears the dogs whine from inside the dining room. They must be wanting to go out for their morning ablutions.

She leaves the kitchen, walks back through the dining room and crosses the hallway with the dogs at her side. Into the mud room, surrounded by wagging tails and lolling tongues and happy panting. She smiles and unlocks the door, opening it up to the morning. The dogs rush past her just as her nearly unclothed self is hit by the full force of the freezing morning.

And yet...

She is covered in goosebumps, tries to pull Will's shirt further down her thighs in a vain attempt to chase warmth, but she remains where she is.

There, in the doorway, looking out over fiercely beautiful vistas. Trees and snow and wildness. And it is cold, yes, freezing; she's shaking. But the newer, softer light brushing everything is a fact. A soft pink, promises of other colours soon. And there is just the faintest suggestion of something other than ice in the air. Something like rushing rivers and tender greens and an urgent sense of freedom. And beyond all that, she thinks, there must be a wealth of other things. Known things. Safe things.

And the opposite of that. Unexplored things. New urges. Adventure. If she just...

"Clarice."

She doesn't turn around, even though he prickles her back.

"Hannibal."

"You should close the door. You'll catch a chill."

"I like it like this," she answers stubbornly, and wonders if this might look like an escape attempt to him. But no. It would be one even more stupid and ill thought out than the last, and she likes to believe that Hannibal thinks better of her than that.

She feels how he comes up to her, standing close behind her. Feels how warm he is, fancies his breath brushes her neck. Somehow she doesn't feel naked in front of him, even though all

she is wearing is Will's shirt and Will's marks.

She wonders if he can smell Will's spend drying on her thighs.

And she wonders if Will handled her rough last night in order to leave visible marks. And if so, are they in challenge to the older man, or in invitation? She must ask him. She realises now that she hasn't quite asked Will what it is *he* wants. She's had him deep inside her, but she doesn't know what he *wants*. Just how he gets there. Just how he manipulates.

Hannibal puts a hand on her shoulder, right on top of a bite mark exposed by the too-big shirt. Presses down just a touch too hard, and she meets the touch.

"You were in the kitchen."

"I was looking for something."

Fingers rubbing naked skin, gently for now. But she can feel the placid threat sinking into her epidermis.

"It seems you aborted your search. You were far away just now."

He moves closer, perhaps to lend her his warmth, perhaps because he can. She leans against him, but she doesn't know if she does it because she is cold, or because she is trying to gentle him in a moment that he is looking to control.

"The dogs wanted out, and I can sense spring," is all she says, and the back of her bare legs grow warm against his slacks.

Very briefly she can feel his lips and nose against her hair. Is he smelling Will, or her?

"Let's go for a walk," is all he says.

She bundles herself up right there, pulls Will's too-big snow pants over her near nakedness, then her parka, and the fur lined boots, bare toes digging into the soft pelt. He beckons her ahead of her out of the door, and she goes, headed unerringly for the trees.

And so they walk the woods, where there are ghost girls in the shadows and dark chimaera stags melding with thorny branches and her mind. She smells sap rising, and she wonders if the snow would feel inviting if she touched it. Like whipped creams and clouds.

They walk in comfortable silence for a while, the dogs running on the periphery. It is her beginning the conversation.

"Yesterday... you promised me that our relationship would reach a point where I would feel safe enough to be carefree, and smiling, and happy. Did you mean it?"

She doesn't mention what else came attached to that promise. It seems counterintuitive.

"I did mean it, but it is of course entirely up to you."

“Up to me.”

It's not a question. He has asked her to give herself over several times now. Requested it, demanded it, while promising to keep her core intact, and she...well, she never liked defeat.

He senses her hesitance, scents blood and opportunity.

“If you left now...”

“You mean if you allowed me to leave,” she says flatly and kicks aside some snow to lay bare a carpet of pine needles beneath.

A fine brow slightly raised at her impudence, but he ignores it as one might an unruly child and carries on without missing a beat:

“...could you go back?”

She stops. Stares unseeingly into the moving shadows among the trees.

“What do you mean?”

“Could you go back? Could you slot into your life again?”

She tilts her head as she considers.

“The Bureau will think me compromised,” she says flatly, “and I was already hanging by a thread anyway. Krendler saw to that. But perhaps if...”

“I'm not talking about the FBI,” he interrupts, “- but rather your life outside of it. Not everything is an institution. You stand without family, that is true, but you must have had friends.”

He's being deliberately cruel, she thinks as she considers his use of past tense. And: when is he not?

“There is...Ardelia,” she says, the name feeling foreign and cumbersome in her mouth. Too big. And as she speaks it out loud, letting it roll awkwardly on her tongue, she realises that she hasn't spared Ardelia a single thought for a very long time.

Her roommate must be sick with worry, she thinks. She must be tearing everything apart to find her. Hassling her bosses at the FBI, raising hell, digging around for information on her own. And here Clarice Starling stands with Hannibal Lecter, and she had about forgotten that Ardelia Mapp ever existed.

And she can't find it in herself to feel bad. She knows because she gives it an earnest try. But it won't happen, she can't muster it up. She thinks it is because she exists here in some sort of a parallel universe, a faraway secret world removed from real life. The rules are different here, and so she won't apologise. Not to herself. Not to Ardelia, wherever she might be.

She is just trying to fucking *live*.

“No,” she says eventually, after a long silence that Hannibal drinks down like wine. “No. I can’t really go back. Can I?”

“So it is.” Hannibal allows himself to look faintly smug, top lip curled infinitesimally, just so, and nostrils flared with her admission of defeat. Delighted that she has reached the conclusion he had meant for her to reach. “In choosing to stay here you choose home. Home is important, isn’t it, Clarice?”

She wants to punch the smugness from his face. She settles for words.

“I didn’t choose to *come* here though; you chose for me. Perhaps I can’t go back, but maybe I can go elsewhere.”

“But would you want to? What could you get elsewhere that you can’t get here, with us? I think you are being deliberately wilful. I think you are putting up a fuss because you feel you ought to.”

Fuck him. Fuck him for forcing his carefully constructed narrative on her and declaring it her will. For *making* it her will.

“You want me to *want* to stay. The way you manipulate free will is devilish. The way you present this as a *choice* is diabolical.”

When he looks at her his pupils have blown his irises so far outwards she can see only black and red. He steps closer, and she marvels at how easily he avails himself of her personal space. One hand on her jaw, his thumb stroking the corner of her mouth. She thinks of sucking the digit into her mouth. She thinks of biting down.

He would like that. He likes her mouth.

“I want you to want to stay because you could easily belong,” he says quietly. His hair is falling down over his forehead, uncharacteristically disordered. “You know that. You’ve bloomed since your arrival. You have become even more beautiful as you fit into yourself, found your place and your purpose.”

She sighs, but she doesn’t move away.

“”Blooms”,” she murmurs. “I don’t know if you are trying to force-grow poisonous flowers in my heart or in my mind.”

“Why not both?”

“So you admit it is with force?”

“I don’t have to *admit* to anything. Such is not our dynamic, Clarice.”

“You want *me* to admit to things.”

He brushes into her, thumb running along her bottom lip, his hold on her gentle but non-negotiable. She’s having to crane her neck to keep meeting his eyes, and oh how sharp his

teeth look when he smiles.

“The balance of power between us is hardly even. As ever you would do well not to forget that.”

“Like I could ever forget,” she says bitterly. “Once you mocked me for trying to turn death into gold. A misguided alchemist, you said. But that is something like what you are trying to do, isn’t it? Only differently. You attempt to turn cruelty into art.”

“”Attempt”? he queries politely, and she shakes her head as much as she can under his hand.

“Art is subjective. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”

“You would be beautiful in the eye of any beholder, Clarice,” he says and his voice is skirting softness.

She doesn’t believe in it.

“You’re toying with me.” And then, because his eyes are so black and red, she asks: “What is it that Will wants? With me? I know some of what *you* want, but he...”

The dogs start yipping, excited, delighted. When she turns her head to look, Will comes up the steep slope towards them, as if summoned by her question. Hannibal doesn’t let go of her, doesn’t step back, and she can feel him all along her front. His rib cage slowly expanding and contracting, the strength of his thighs, his thumb against her mouth. She’s getting used to it; he has ensured it.

She had intended to wait. He has been freely and arrogantly touching her for a long while now, but he wants her consent to go any further. He wants her to doom herself, and she had thought to leave him hanging. Last night, with Will fucking her so deep, she had decided to keep Hannibal at arm’s length for as long as possible, because there is power in a play like that.

There is power in this too, she thinks. There is power in giving someone what they want. There is power in making an active choice.

Power in not being powerless.

And perhaps, just perhaps, it might compel Will. Force his hand.

“I think you may kiss me now,” she says to Hannibal, her voice clear if not terribly loud.

Hannibal doesn’t hesitate. In fact, he looks coiled, ready, lips just inches from hers, as if he has seen everything play out on her face and have just patiently awaited the vocal evidence of her consent.

His lips on hers and all she can think is that he didn’t lie, he really isn’t trying to be gentle at all.

He eats her alive. That's what he does. He eats her alive. He is being entirely himself, just as he had promised, a gluttonous monster taking taking *taking* everything she has and then more still.

One hand wrapped in her hair, the other about her hip. Angling her head just so, pulling her into him. It's harsh and unforgiving and there is no quarter, just his tongue and his teeth and how could she possibly have thought that she could keep up with him, play him, *best* him? Voracious, rapacious, she whines into his mouth as he sucks on her tongue, as she tangles her fingers in his hair. This was stupid, how could she have prepared, there is no way back.

Then he stops, and she chases after him before she can stop herself, before she can make herself return to being *Clarice* and not some creature ruled by nerve endings and fear and delight.

He steadies her, wraps his arms about her and holds her close, and all she can think about is how inconceivably hard she just tripped herself up. Hubris and pride, what foolishness.

She needs something, can't have done this for nothing, she must win too.

"If I asked to leave here, would you let me?" she whispers against his lips, and she is shivering, shaking. Tunnel vision, shallow breaths. Pins and needles and her blood rushing like rivers in spring. "If I ever said: stop, if you care for me, stop... would you do it?"

Hannibal looks at her, and the clouds of their breaths mingle like vapour.

"Not in a thousand years," he says, and well, at least now she knows.

Then she remembers Will.

She turns to look for him, and he is there, eyes black and blown. Right by her side, right by *their* side, close enough to touch. So she does. Still standing within Hannibal's arms she reaches out and grabs Will's hand, and it's warm and dry and safe. It steadies her, and she is grateful, smiles at him with kiss-stung lips and wild eyes.

Will smiles back, and it's beautiful. She can say that, quietly, to herself. *Beautiful*.

"So good of you to join us, dear Will," says Hannibal, and he is resting his chin on her crown quite like he belongs there.

"It's a beautiful morning," says Will, calm, steady. "It would be a pity to sleep it away."

"Indeed."

"Come," says Will. "I want to show you something."

And they walk. Will lets go of her hand, but Hannibal keeps an arm about her waist, and she walks between them with a sense of otherworldliness so acute that her fingers and toes tingle, her face goes hot then cold. There is a fundamental slip and slide of bedrock, something seismic, but invisible and silent. She can hear only the birdsong, the creaking of trees, the

wind, the breaths of the two men with her. Not the sound of vital fundamentals crumbling and disintegrating, and that is so strange, isn't it, because it *should* make an awful racket.

She touches a finger to her bruised lips, and vaguely she feels grateful for Hannibal's arm anchoring her, even if it is also a chain.

She turns for Will. He is looking at her, and he smiles, again. She loves it when he does that. The softness of it, those dapples of light within him smoothing out the dark just a little. She hopes he means it when he smiles, she hopes it isn't just a way to steer her, beguile and control her. She wants him to *mean* his smiles.

They are walking downhill, and she realises she has never been this way before. With Hannibal she has only ever walked up the mountain slope, and the night she escaped she ran around the house and down. Now they are somewhere different, and soon the slope meanders into an embankment. The trees change too; the ponderosas give way to bare weeping willows, petrified by frost.

And here then: a river.

Will's river. Still frozen, but cracks are steadily appearing on the ice. The willows are hovering protectively over it, laden with icicles as they are, bending and bowing to the sundered surface. The sunlight, so faint and so new, turns the icicles to prisms, throwing pink virgin light all around.

When these willows are in leaves they must form a green tunnel over the river. Branches just smoothing over the surface, letting dapples of sun through to play on the dark water. She can, if she concentrates, see the river flow freely, dragonflies and water birds and fish and peace. Hear the laughing, whispering, murmuring, rowdy flow of the water.

It must be mind-breakingly beautiful here in summer.

"This is where I come to fish," says Will softly next to her. "This is where I come to remember that I can always close my eyes and wade into the stream."

He meets Hannibal's eyes then, and what she sees between them, it makes her yearn, covet, wish. Their understanding is so profound, so deep; deeper even than the bedrock that is currently crumbling beneath her own feet. She wants a connection like that, she has never had it and she *wants* it.

A pity only it's come about like this.

Hannibal still holds her, free hand stroking her hair, but Will doesn't touch her because he doesn't need to right now.

He has her anyway. Oh god, fuck him.

She wants to live, yes, eke out a space for herself in this faraway parallel world, but she wants to do so on her own terms, not theirs.

"When it's spring, and summer, will you take me fishing?"

It's a commitment, a promise, a vow, and a small little way to be her own. To manipulate back.

Will turns his head to look at her, and his eyes are just as hot and as soft as she had hoped. She wonders if he sees through her, then thinks that *of course* he sees through her.

"Of course," he says, so quietly.

Hannibal looks openly amused.

"Back to the house?" he suggests. "It must be time for breakfast."

Yes. The house. She turns and tries to glimpse it between the trees, but they are too far away. She has got business at the house, has she not? She started this day with a purpose, and now more than ever it seems vital that she fulfills it. They have left her little crumbs, after all, and it would be rude not to follow the trail.

So she walks ahead, dogs around her. Steps long, shoulders back. Happy to have something to solve; a mystery. Delighted to not just be an observer helplessly pulled along with events outside her control.

In the mud room she removes her outerwear, goes back to wearing nothing but a shirt. She doesn't care. She feels sure there is no danger to her here, outside of Hannibal and Will.

They would never allow it.

Back into the kitchen, instincts somersaulting against the bones of her skull, bare feet soundless against the tile. She can sense Will and Hannibal at her back, but they are keeping some distance, keen but silent.

Fine by her. She is eager now, almost vibrating with the scent of... of...

In front of her, the three doors she chose from before. She studies them, then opens the first.

Wine. Several wine fridges, the various displays showing different temperatures, all of them no doubt ideal for the vintages she can see resting behind fine glass.

She steps back and closes the door again. Opens the second. A larger room; she can sense more space and depth before her. She takes a step inside, but keeps hold of the door because something makes her nostrils flare, her hair stand on end, something...

It's a pantry. Enormous, temperate. Dark walls, artfully lit by splashes of illumination, thrown by brushed steel sconces. Floor to ceiling metal shelves filled with exquisite condiments and tins of liver pâté. Hanging hocks of jamón ibérico. Dried herbs. Truffles, white and black. Saffron, Madagascan vanilla pods. Koroneiki olive oil and matsutake mushrooms.

She knows it all because she spent months learning and cataloguing Hannibal Lecter's expensive tastes.

And right in the middle of the tiled floor, soiling a Herman Miller office chair, sits Paul Krendler, gagged and trussed like a Christmas turkey.

Sweaty, dirty, bloodied and quite bruised, but mostly whole.

“Ah, yes,” comes Hannibal’s voice from behind her. “You don’t have to decide right now, of course, but we would very much like you to kill him.”

teeth

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Typhoid and Swans

Chapter 17: teeth

“Has he been in here all along?”

She doesn't turn her head, keeps her eyes on Krendler, but Hannibal has silently moved to her side, and the stark offence on his face is clear in her peripheral.

“Of course not. There is food in here.”

“And *he* isn't?”

She catches the twitch of Hannibal's lips, but her attention is fleeting. Most of her focus lies with Krendler.

He is asleep, or unconscious. His long neck is tipped back on the headrest of the chair, his eyes closed. His arms are tied with thin, sharp twine to the armrests, his legs to the wheel base. She can see the outline of his thick lips underneath the gag - a Hermès tie - his mouth open against the silk. His face is a turrid, abstract palette of blues, greens, purples and yellows; it would seem that he had been unwise enough to fight his captors.

She is in no doubt of the plural.

He is dressed in stained running clothes, and he reeks. She wonders if he has been allowed to visit the bathroom, or if he has simply been forced to sit in his own filth. She decides on the former. The stench is that of fear, not shit and piss. Besides, she cannot imagine Hannibal allowing a potential meal stewing in its own excrement.

Slowly, she walks a wide circle around him, her bare feet soft and quiet against the tile. She looks him over carefully, and at least visually she is able to confirm her first impression: Paul Krendler is whole. She sees no missing limbs, can ascertain no serious injuries, bar bruising and humiliation.

She returns to the front of the chair and meets Krendler's open eyes. He must have been stirred awake by their voices.

When he sees her, his eyes widen almost comically, and he begins to struggle vainly against his restraints. The whole chair rocks, and Hannibal sticks out a casual foot and places it on the wheel base, to keep it from toppling.

Something tells her that Krendler has been kept in the dark about her presence at this remote mansion.

She wonders what she must look like to him, wearing only a man's shirt, with swollen lips and red cheeks and snarled hair. Does he notice? Whatever it is he thinks he sees, it doesn't stop him from begging for help. She can clearly hear the words, over and over, even as muffled and choked as they are against the luxurious gag:

Help me, Starling.

You fool, she thinks. How can I?

She turns her back on him, ignores the muffled, desperate sounds he makes and focuses on Will and Hannibal. They are standing beside each other, very close, shoulders touching. An equally diffuse expression on both of their faces, but even so, this is the most united she has seen them.

"How long?" she asks.

It is Hannibal that answers.

"When Will had to leave us a while ago, he didn't just go out and kill a very bad man. He also brought one back."

"I see," she says blankly, and doesn't look at Will. Hannibal she knows, Hannibal is honest about what he is. She still cannot quite assign Will Graham.

He had brought Paul Krendler here.

Hannibal takes a small step forward and gently puts his hand on her winter cold cheek.

"It's a gift, Clarice," he says. "For you."

And behind her the noises from Krendler increase in volume and ferocity.

She has always been a quick thinker, fleet of foot. A *sound* thinker, sharp and logical. Even so, now she finds herself white and empty, thoughts slippery and impossible to grasp.

But in moments of impossibility she has always allowed herself to be carried by intuition and primal, base instinct. It's how she survived being trapped in a dark basement with a homicidal madman. It is how she has, thus far, survived *this*.

Even, whispers a dark voice within her, somehow *thrived*.

And so she says, aching polite:

"May I have some time to consider this?"

"Of course. I did say that you could."

“Thank you,” she says. And then: a gambit. “Could I exchange some words with Mr Krendler in private?”

A fractional hesitation, a minute narrowing of his eyes. Slightly behind him Will remains impassive, but she has his attention like a cloak about her back. He’s taking everything in, letting all the things she is inadvertently giving away dab down like sharp little brush strokes. He is forming a vision in his mind’s eye more vivid than anything she could ever see.

She ignores his regard because she has to.

“I give you my word,” she says to Hannibal, “- that I will not attempt anything rash.”

The three of them know that they all have wildly differing definitions of *rash*, but nonetheless Hannibal simply nods once, then turns and leaves the larder. No doubt going to eat breakfast.

Will hangs back.

“Clarice,” he says simply, then steps forward and kisses her, soft, sweet, his hand splayed and cupping her cheek. A movie kiss, carefully posed and tender.

Such fucking show.

Then he too turns and leaves. He closes the pantry door behind him, and Clarice is alone with Paul Krender. She turns to him, and with revulsion and the very tip of her fingers she pulls the damp gag down from his mouth.

“Jesus fuck, Starling!”

His voice is a pitiful croak, but he still manages to radiate some tatted outrage.

“Are you injured?” she asks, quickly taking a step back.

“Knocked about. That Graham is one vicious motherfu...here, untie me.”

When all he gets is silence he looks up at her. It is apparent that he doesn't like what he thinks he can see in her face.

“What the fuck is this? How long have you been here?”

“All along,” she answers quietly. “I’ve been here all along.”

She takes another step back.

“Listen, Starling, just untie me and let’s...”

“Did you try to find me?”

He seems to struggle to follow her, to adapt to what she is now.

“Of course we’ve tried to find you, Starling. You’re an FBI agent!”

And it wouldn’t do to simply lose one of *those*, would it. She crosses her arms over her chest and looks at him. Her legs are cold. She wonders if he can see up her shirt from his sedentary position.

“And in your search, did you find anything to indicate what had happened to me? If I was alive, or dead?”

Again he starts struggling against his ties. She can see angry marks on his wrists where the twine has cut in during past struggles. New sweat blooms on his running shirt. He really does stink.

“Not a goddamn thing,” he says. “Most thought you were dead, but I remembered how Lecter stashed Miriam Lass for later. Figured if we found you, he would probably lurk close by.”

Opportunistic scavenger.

“Can you be traced here, Mr Krendler? In any way at all?”

“No idea. I was out running, then everything went black. Next thing I know I’m spending a lot of time getting acquainted with the inside of a car trunk. Then I’m here. And where, exactly, is *here*, Starling?”

She doesn’t answer the question. She considers him instead, and she can’t help the way her lip curls.

That this snivelling piece of shit with his bald patch and paunch and hyena neck should be her crossroads. This misogynistic asshole that has gone out of his way to fuck her career and her life.

Hannibal must love it. He’s probably out there right now, laughing into his fancy fucking artisan coffee.

Krendler doesn’t seem to like her silence, or her extended inaction. She can see how scared he is, how his eyes roll wildly in their sockets. And it makes him stupid, the fear.

“What is going on, Starling? What is your deal with those two? Graham *kissed* you. You let him! Are you really so fucking weak that they can Stockholm your country trash ass just like that? Need I remind you that...”

“Oh shut up, Krendler!” she snaps. “I need to think.”

How long since he arrived here? She wishes her grasp on time wasn’t so tenuous, so slippery. She wishes she had taken more care to take note of the passing of hours and days. Has enough time gone by that he would have been found by now if Will had made some misstep while bringing him here?

“I need to go,” she tells him. They will be wondering if I stay in here too long.”

“Starling, I swear to god, I will...”

“Oh hush,” she cuts him off. “You’ve been here this long, you can wait a little longer, *Paul*.”

She closes the door on his shouted protests. Let him talk to the snails and the foie gras.

She leaves Krendler with a goal sharp in her mind, but first she goes to her room.

She wants clothes. She wants to be clean.

She wants to feel...pretty.

She runs the gilded taps, and while the bath fills up she paces the floor and wishes she could see herself. Hannibal had shown her, yesterday - was it yesterday? - but she thinks the change between then and now must be enormous. She wants to see her face again. She wants to see if Paul Krendler’s fate is something that is nestled at the back of her gaze like a malignant spark. She wants to see if Hannibal’s kiss sits reclined in her Cupid’s bow

Then she sits in the hot bath feeling so cold and she thinks of Will’s river. She thinks of her withering fundamentals, and she thinks of how there is no way back.

Nothing can help against that; how there is no way back. She would laugh, but she fears the sound of it.

She leaves the warm water. She brushes her hair until it falls heavy down her back, curling haughtily from the steam of the bath. She puts on a deep green lounge set, the silk cool and smooth against her skin. She pinches her cheeks.

She wishes for warmth, for Will, but she does feel a little better. Calmer. More collected.

She quietly leaves her room again, and starts downstairs.

Hannibal is not in the dining room, nor in the kitchen. She doesn’t see Will either, but she suspects he has retreated to the third floor with the dogs.

He has shown her just where he stands, but the decision to stand with him is hers.

He won’t overtly push her.

But Hannibal will.

She hasn’t yet received explicit permission to roam parts of the house other than those assigned to her, but even so she finds her way to the east wing and Hannibal’s room. She will be crushed and diminished if she doesn’t stretch limits more than she already has. She will be swallowed whole if she doesn’t take liberties within her captivity.

Politely she knocks on the door, three sharp taps, and then she waits.

Hannibal doesn't keep her long. He opens as if he has been waiting for her, and he plays at no artifice or false pleasantries. He simply nods, then stands aside to allow her entrance.

The curtains are drawn against the shy mid-morning light, and the room is heavy with shadows. She moves towards the only illumination, a Tiffany light glowing warmly on a bedside table.

On her way she sees herself in the mirror, a passing sepia ghost in soft dusk. It's but a second's glimpse, but she looks the same as yesterday and how is that even *possible*?

She sits, uninvited, in the sleek armchair next to the bed. Hannibal takes the bed itself, sits on the edge with his elbows on his knees and his hands loosely clasped. His hair is still unkempt from where she pulled on it in the forest, and his sleeves are pushed up to show strong arms. Fine sinews and strong bones.

She likes him like this. Dishevelled and more...true.

"Is it me or him?" she asks and puts her hands on her lap. "Is that what this is?"

"It is no such thing at all," he answers immediately. "This is for you, Clarice, and we won't think less of you for refusing. Will and I simply think that it will help you. Catharsis. Freedom."

Metamorphosis.

She steeples her fingers, realises what she's doing and begins fidgeting with the hem of her long top instead.

Let him see.

"He doesn't know where he is," she says as if it means nothing when it could mean everything. "He's got no idea."

"Will was careful. He knows what he's doing."

He's a natural hangs there shiny and ugly in the air between them.

"This would mean no way back," she says. "For me. Truly no way back. I would burn bridges I hadn't even imagined existed."

He just smiles at her, because of course.

"I very much enjoyed kissing you, Clarice," he eventually says and *that*, she thinks, is his answer. "What did you feel?"

"Too much," she says immediately, and honestly. "I felt too much. Monstrous...

It felt like you tore me to pieces."

Hannibal just nods, but his stance becomes sharper and keener, he leans further forward and in the light from the Tiffany she could swear his eyes turn maroon. He looks pleased. Victorious.

“You had hoped to rule me with drugs, hadn’t you?” she carries on. “Shape me to your will that way.”

Her use of the word *shape* is quite intentional; she remembers what he had said to her in the woods about Mischa.

“That was my original intention, yes,” he admits easily.

“But this must be so much more satisfying for you. To get me to where I am with no aids save for your mind, and Will’s. No cheating.”

“It is,” he says and he doesn’t bother to hide his smugness.

A monster lost in self congratulation.

She remembers that from the case notes, attributed, if she is not mistaken, to Dr Bedelia du Maurier.

Well. Look how things had worked out for *her*.

“Are you glad?” she asks. “Are you pleased that I am still me? Not an empty vessel? Not a version of your sister?”

“I do believe I am, yes.”

And he holds out a hand.

“Come to me,” he says and it’s an insidious echo she can’t refuse.

She stands from the chair and walks those few steps over to him. She takes his offered hand like it is nothing, so used is she to his touch by now. He moves her close, in between his legs, then turns her around with his hands on her hips. Pulls her down to sit.

And so she is on his lap once again, and her face flares hot with memories of shame and helplessness, terror and safety.

Arousal.

He shushes her even though she makes no sound at all, and he slowly gathers her hair together to push it forward over her shoulder. His heart beats steady against her back as his hands come to rest high on her waist. His chin on her shoulder, his cheek to her cheek.

His mouth far too close to her throat.

“Krendler will die either way,” he murmurs. “The only question is how. And by whose hand.” He whispers his lips up her neck and bites, ever so gently, into her earlobe. Then he deposits

his next words straight in the intricate whirls and grooves of her ear shell. “You might be the more...merciful option. I do not wish for you to lose that shining part of yourself. The light. The fire. You ought to choose *mercy*, Clarice.”

His lips back on her throat again, barely a touch, just hot breaths and the cold they leave behind.

“Mercy?” she whispers. “Krendler is hardly a lamb.”

And she tilts her neck to better grant him access. Beneath her bottom the muscles of his thighs flow and bunch, and she shifts on his lap, restless and tight.

“Of course he is no lamb,” says Hannibal. “And you hate him. He has done you untold damage. He deserves this, you know it as well as I do. As well as Will does. But you, you are no creature of inherent cruelty.” His lips won’t leave her skin, travelling with such careful, deliberate slowness. It tells her he’s having to rein himself in. “I don’t want you turning against yourself.”

“Too much. You don’t want me turning against myself *too much*,” she corrects him. “Just enough.”

She can feel the short rise and fall of his shoulders on the back of her own as he shrugs. It’s the only answer she gets, but it’s enough.

“And if I don’t do it, what will you do? *Play* with him?”

“It is likely. Unless I get bored. Mr Krendler is truly a snivelling creature.”

His hands have found their way underneath her shirt now, and they brush lightly over the tenderness of silver and iron before venturing slightly higher. His touch is firm but gentle, she thinks, he is not being unrestrained and ravenous. Oh yes, he *is* holding back.

That is not what she wants.

He promised her that she would see him for what he is, and that is what she is after. Truth. She does not want polite manipulation and gentle machinations. The least he can fucking do is be his true self when he takes her apart.

“Use your teeth,” she says and closes her eyes. “Really use them.”

And he bites deep into her trapezius, that tender, exposed place where shoulder slopes into neck. She can feel his sharp teeth break skin at the same time as his fingers brush her nipples, and the juxtaposition, the violence with the gentleness and the pain with the arousal...

It narrows, then. Everything, all the big, unspeakable things, they hurtle with great violence through the head of a needle, and all that comes out on the other side is the viscous trickle of blood down her clavicle and Hannibal’s calm heartbeats against her contracting lungs.

Thump. Thump.

She can't hear her own gasp, but she knows she births it, can feel it slip past her lips like a small creature chased by hounds. She arches her back with it all, the pain and the impossible heat and the feel of his strong tongue lapping blood.

She wants to turn around on his lap. She wants to bite his lips. She wants to patch up her crumbling bedrock with chewing gum and useless Lutheran prayers.

She wants him deep inside, feasting.

But his hands slip out from beneath her shirt.

"Not yet," he murmurs, and she might cry.

He wraps his arms around her middle and snuggles her close into him.

"Let's just sit for a while," he murmurs. "Let's just breathe, and think."

And he licks the wound he gave her like it's meant to be comforting to her. She can feel the snarling raging starving power in his bones, and she sits there and lets him.

Chapter End Notes

One or two chapter left.

sharp objects

Typhoid and Swans

Chapter 18: sharp objects

She sits by the kitchen island while Hannibal makes lunch.

Crisp white apron, economical movements and soft opera in the background. Glints of light bouncing off sharp blades, smells of sea and earth. A fine performance, she thinks, watching him flow sinuously through the motions. She is rattled by the intimacy of it, invited as she is into one of his most treasured domains. Watching as he prepares a meal, all the while knowing precisely who and what he is.

In its own way, the closeness of this is as terrible as sitting on his lap and asking him to bite.

He washes small potatoes and then roasts them on a bed of sea salt, skin still on. He handles an octopus with brisk efficiency; he severs tentacles, and he extracts ink which he tells her he will save to use for pasta. He pours her a glass of flinty, grassy Bourgogne, even though it's early still, and she turns her back on the door behind which Paul Krendler languishes while sipping it.

She is quiet, attention wandering between him and her own faraway, distorted images in the copper pans. The silence between them is comfortable though, Hannibal pleased enough with his audience that he sees no need for conversation.

He boils the tentacles in salted water, then grills them, then dresses them with olive oil, lemon juice and fresh coriander.

She worries at her bite wound and does not ask where the fuck he procures fresh octopus and Femminello lemons and Lambda olive oil all the way out here.

No doubt he is aware of her acute unrest, but Hannibal says nothing of it. He assembles the potatoes on a vintage Herend serving platter, then arranges the pieces of octopus on top. He proffers the platter like an offering, but his smile is small and regal.

"Polvo à Lagareiro," he says. "Let's eat, Clarice."

And he politely ushers her ahead of him, into the dining room. Puts the platter down and pulls out a chair for her. She sits with a bow of her neck in thanks.

Will joins them.

He comes quietly into the room, looking ruffled and slightly unkempt. Comfortable clothes and stubble and messy hair. Heavy lids but sharp eyes, taking her in, taking everything in.

Then he pulls out the chair next to her and sits down.

It's not his usual place. When the three of them share a meal, she and Will sit on the left and right of Hannibal, who claims the head of the table. But now Will sits next to her, close enough that their shoulders and thighs touch. Quietly he lifts a hand, and strokes the bite mark Hannibal left on her. Perhaps a little too hard; she can feel the slow wetness of blood with his touch.

Will looks...pleased. She can feel her nipples bud and tighten against the green silk of her top, at the look exchanged between the two men. She gasps quietly when Will's fingers come away red, when he brings them to his mouth and licks them clean, maintaining eye contact all the while.

The tip of Hannibal's tongue flicks out, his breaths become somewhat shallow, but without a word he moves the silverware and plates and glasses from Will's normal place to his newly chosen one, and begins serving them lunch.

"Please," he says. "Eat."

They eat and drink. It is quiet at first.

Just knives and forks against expensive bone china. Just the wind moving through the trees outside. Just the banal babble of fine champagne in crystal glasses, and if she concentrates she thinks she can hear Krendler whimper in the pantry.

She shouldn't have left the gag off him.

Through the large window behind Hannibal she can see that it snows again. It looks different though, the snow, when shot through with something like daylight. Warm light in here, cold light out there, but light all the same. And the stag stands up close against the glass, snowflakes in its hide. It's looking at her intently, and she solemnly meets its midnight gaze, then gives it a nod. Next to her Will says nothing, but she thinks perhaps he sees it too.

Or at least he knows.

She may feel unsteady and out of sorts, but her mind is so very clear. She knows precisely what is what, she sees everything in sharp detail.

"So," she begins, "- what are your plans for this house? Will you stay here? Move on?"

She is quite deliberate in her use of pronoun, but Hannibal makes no mention of it.

"We are very lucky to have it," he answers. "It is...uniquely suited to our needs. Though we would very much like to travel once things quiet down a tad, this house is a most excellent base. A fine place to retreat to, return to over and over."

"If that is so, then you took quite the risk," she says and pops a small piece of tentacle into her mouth, "- bringing Krendler here. And me," she says as if an afterthought.

It is not an afterthought.

“Not really,” says Hannibal placidly. “There are of course contingencies in place.”

She is not so cocky that she asks about those contingencies. She can imagine. She doesn't need - or want - it in auditory shapes, somehow made *real* with words.

This eternal tightrope walk is exhausting. Could anyone ever blame her for giving in?

How stupid is she? Of course they could. The FBI, her few friends and acquaintances. Ardelia.

Fuck them.

“Well, I spoke to him,” she says, “ - and from what I can gather he doesn't appear to harbour the faintest clue about his current location.”

“Fortuitous,” says Will blandly.

She shoots him a look, perhaps needlessly sharp.

“And speaking of our dear Mr Krendler,” segues Hannibal just as she had thought he would, “ - have you given any thoughts to your preferred course of action?”

He looks at her bite mark as he speaks, and the curl of his mouth and the narrowing of his eyes speaks of hunger. Different kinds of hunger, she thinks, and she can hear her own breaths stutter into a drum boy rhythm.

“What if I just want to watch?” she asks. “What if I want to watch the two of you?” She spears a potato with rather more force than is necessary. “I have yet to see you, ah...perform, after all.”

As soon as she says it she regrets it. Perhaps Hannibal performs, but Will does not. She knows he doesn't. For him, aesthetics means nothing. Painting his blackness in rich, bejewelled tones of *meaning* does.

She touches his hand in silent atonement.

“It's fine,” he whispers, and she must believe that he means it.

“As tantalising as it sounds,” picks up Hannibal, “Mr Krendler was handpicked especially for you, Clarice. It would be a terrible waste to...entrust him to Will and me. Wouldn't you agree?”

She doesn't answer, because she can't.

She just looks at them, because they are her only firm points left, the only ones who know her now, who she really is. And maybe they can convince her that she has true worth.

And that is horrific.

“Excuse me,” she says and puts her napkin down.

Will follows her out in the hallway. She stands looking at that ridiculous, ostentatious double door and she can feel him behind her.

“What do you want me to do?” she asks the door.

“I brought Krendler here,” is Will’s answer as he moves closer, his steps slow and considered, as if he might spook her out of the door and away if he isn’t careful.

It’s closed though, she thinks. The door is closed and her mind is clear.

She turns to face him. He is nearer to her than she had thought, almost touching her. But he is good at that, isn’t he, good at quietly stepping inside bodies and minds.

“And?”

“*And*, as you pointed out back there, doing so was a great risk. One, Clarice, I wouldn’t have taken unless I felt it important.”

“Just tell me,” she says, and she is refusing to make it sound like an entreaty, “Tell me why you want me here. Why you want *me*.”

“I enjoy my freedom.”

He says it as if it explains everything. She wants to hit him.

“Plain words, Will Graham. Enough with the coyness,” she says, *begs*. “Enough with all the things hiding between the lines. Tell me who you are. Show me what you have become.”

“I want you to kill him.”

So simple and plain and devastating.

“For me,” he adds, and hammers the last nail into her wrists.

Well, she thinks bleakly, she *did* ask.

“Come here.”

He takes her arm, and his grip is almost unforgiving, coercive, as he leads her over to the carved monks settle by the door. Sits her down, and sits himself next to her. Close, tight, encircled, and she doesn’t know if she is suffocated or safe. Not with his arm around her and his lines against her lines and his stubbled cheek burning her soft one. Not with his words vibrating against her delicate jaw bone.

“I like my life now. I like myself. I feel peace like I never have before. But, unstable elements could jeopardise it.”

“Hannibal.”

“Yes. His appetites are voracious. He can take tremendous risks pursuing them. His pride and his gluttony could doom us to incarceration or death.”

“Contingencies,” she says, looking straight ahead, thinking of how Hannibal now seeks open vistas so that he may see his captivity approach.

“Yes. He has them, and I want some of my own.”

“You want more safety.”

Beside her Will shifts, and she shifts with him. Now, she thinks, all her old corner stones will be gone, and the new ones not yet steady enough to stand on. Perhaps they never will be.

“Safety is an elusive concept, and abstract,” he answers. “I had no expectations of it when I chose to go with Hannibal. But our existence could be made less...reckless.”

He turns to face her, and his eyes...she wants to look away but he won't allow it, he clasps her chin and the grip is absolute.

“You could be our stable element, Clarice. You saw the stag, and then I saw *you* at that press conference, and I knew. I knew.”

“Was it just me you saw?” she wonders, and breathes in the smell of winter about him. Snow and pines and something distinct but faraway.

“The stag. You know, I hadn't seen it for years. I saw it last when I was chasing Hannibal in Italy. Yet here it was, right behind you, holding eye contact with the cameras just as steadfastly as you did.”

She is not surprised. She is not surprised at all. Warm, tactile elation shivers through her with this confirmation that she had shared something with Will Graham even before meeting him.

“When Hannibal gutted me like a fish, the last thing I saw before I lost consciousness was the stag on the floor, bleeding out. Next to...” Will's voice catches, breaks, and what isn't there echoes loud and clear all the way up to the rafters. “Well. I was happy to see the beast with you.”

He draws a breath, and a finger sweeps across the corner of her mouth. Over and over. His hold on her chin is still non-negotiable though, and she wonders how she could ever have thought that he was the weak link. The one to exploit. Boy, did that ever come back to bite her on the ass.

“I don't want to change Hannibal's nature. He is an unquantifiable force, spectacular and beautiful. But I want him just a smidge tempered. You already won Alana's life. You could do more.”

“Iron and silver,” she whispers. “Stable yet *malleable*.”

“Strong,” he whispers. “Mine. Ours.”

Then:

“Together.”

And there it is, isn't it. What she has always wanted. Belonging. And doesn't Will know it. She can't even think him terribly clever for it, because it's so *obvious*. If anything it is a very cheap shot, but one that nonetheless penetrates through skin, muscle and bone. She can feel it lodge in her heart, nestling uncomfortably next to the garnet that is her.

“You started out good,” she says. “You know, at the beginning of my stay here I thought that maybe you could be saved. That I could save you.”

He smiles a little, shakes his head.

“No. Instead it will be me saving you.”

“By asking me to kill.”

“Kill your old life. Move on. *Become*.”

“You make it sound easy. I'm sworn to uphold the law. I made it my entire identity. It's *not* easy.”

“Your identity is eroding faster than you can fathom, Clarice. You are causing yourself pain by fighting it. Let it happen.”

“Like you did? Don't be a hypocrite. You fought it too.”

He kisses her, and he speaks his next words into her mouth, dropping them on her tongue for her to tear into with her teeth:

“And how I wish I hadn't.”

“You've already got such a lot of me. You've taken, and taken, and I've given. I've fucked you. I will fuck you again. Because I want to. Do you understand that? *Because I want to*. Is that not enough?”

“No,” says Will simply.

She looks at him, at his face that used to be soft and kind, and his eyes that are dark and light and she still doesn't know what he is and she wants to sink into him because that would be the easiest.

“You've killed before,” he carries on. “Haven't you? How did that feel?”

“It was always self defence!”, she snaps. “This would be cold blooded murder. I know you are aware of the difference, Will, you aren't that far gone. Perhaps you never will be.”

“But how did it feel?”

“Necessary.”

“Well. So is this.”

She is trying to gauge the level of threat when they are interrupted.

“Clarice. Will.”

Hannibal, come to look for them. He looks calm enough, not put out that she abandoned his thoughtfully prepared lunch and pulled Will along with her.

“Are you coming back to the table?”

She considers it. She does. But she needs space, she needs air, she needs...

“No,” she says. “I’m taking the dogs for a walk.” She kisses Will, then gently extracticates herself from his arms. “On my own,” she adds.

Hannibal keeps his face carefully schooled, and behind her Will doesn’t move at all. But she can feel how coiled and poised they both are, the tension in tendons and bones.

They don’t want to give her up. Neither of them wants to give her up.

And how *good* that feels.

She takes the dogs and chooses to walk up the forested slope rather than down the valley.

She doesn’t head towards Will’s river. It feels wrong, somehow, to go there without him. She sticks instead to the curiously light dusk thrown by hoarfrost trees, where she would normally roam with Hannibal. She can’t see or sense Mischa, but she suspects the frail spectre is only here when Hannibal is.

The stag is with her though. She can feel it behind her, hear how it crunches leaves and frost beneath its hooves.

She thinks of how they nearly touched in New York. She never got to feel it. Never got to *know*.

She is out of sight of the house now. Distance and trees ensure she is entirely hidden. The dogs are running up ahead; she can hear them but not see them.

She is alone.

She turns around.

She had been right. The stag is right there. It has stopped as she has stopped, and now they watch each other.

It is she beginning to walk towards the beast, while it is staying put. Watching her come, still and prescient. Head raised high, feathers and scales moving slowly in the wind. Antlers so large, so wide; a crown beyond her belief.

She stops right before the it. A breath away. Just one.

She can smell the creature. Pine and musk and mulch. She can feel it, its breath on her face. Warmth. She can see herself in its large pupils; her wild hair and seeking eyes.

She meets its gaze. It stands there calmly. Waiting. Breathing. Slowly she raises her hand to touch its muzzle. It looks soft. Its eyes are black and arcane, but its muzzle looks so soft. She wants to feel it. She wants to rest her forehead against its flank, she wants to hold her hand against its heartbeats. She wants its secrets, its truth, its warmth.

But she lets her hand fall again. She doesn't want to know. She can't bear to know.

"Yes," she tells the stag. "I know. I *know*."

And she begins walking back to the house.

She brings Krendler Champagne.

He still sits with the gag around his neck like a jaunty neck scarf, and he is wild eyed, a ridiculously large ring of white around iris and pupil.

"What the fuck is going on, Starling?" he croaks the seconds she opens the door, carrying one of Hannibal's Baccarat champagne coupes full to the brim with vintage Dom Perignon.

She crosses the small space of the pantry and holds the coupe to his lips. He gulps down the Champagne eagerly, sloppily. He must be very thirsty. Perhaps now, when she has discovered him here, Hannibal and Will can no longer be bothered to sustain him.

"They want me to kill you," she tells him conversationally.

He coughs, gags the Champagne back up. It dribbles down his chin and she doesn't wipe it for him. There are limits to her benevolence.

"Why?" he asks.

"I guess they think that with a bit of murder there will be no going back for me," she oversimplifies.

"But what do they want with *you*? What is it about you that has made them do this? I don't get it."

I guess that makes two of us, you piece of shit, she thinks, and doesn't answer him. And he carries on regardless:

"And what's in it for you? Because there must be something in it for you. Or at least Lecter is making you think so."

This is unusually perceptive for Krendler, she thinks, even if he doesn't seem to account for Will Graham's influence.

But still.

She figures that once upon a time, before he became a back-stabbing desk jockey with a flair for scavenging, he would have had some kind of role in law, or law enforcement. He must have been somewhat decent at it to rise in the ranks all the way up to Deputy Assistant Attorney General at Justice. He must have had some kind of instinct.

He is asking the right questions now.

It's just that none of it is any of his fucking business.

"I suppose there is quite a lot in it for me," she tells him honestly. She doesn't tell him what though. He could never understand.

He struggles against his bonds again. Stupid of him, she thinks absently. Big waste of energy. She runs her finger along the rim of the crystal coupe. The resulting chime is fine and fragile. Haunting. She could float away on it.

She doesn't want to. She wants to be right here.

"Release me, Starling."

"We're in the far Canadian north, Krendler. Bumfuck nowhere. Even if I did, you wouldn't get far. I know. I tried."

Her volunteering that piece of information seems to scare him almost senseless, and it makes him stupid.

"You're toast!" he shouts. "Understand me, Starling? Your life, your career, just fucking *poof*. Gone. No going back."

Well. She already knows that she can't go back. Maybe elsewhere, but never *back*.

And with his newfound or rediscovered perception, he must know too.

She is not surprised when she senses them both behind her. They have been waiting for this.

She had known they would come.

"Clarice," says Hannibal quietly and puts his hands on her shoulders. "We have been looking for you."

“I’m right here,” she murmurs, and she can feel how gently she is coming undone. There is no violence to it, just a quiet realignment of cells and atoms, hopes and dreams, Will and Hannibal. “I’m not going anywhere. I can’t.”

She feels for her heart. Probes it with her mind like she would probe a broken tooth with her tongue. It is there. The sharp object, the shining garnet resting snugly in an atrium. Whatever happens it will always be there.

“Give me the knife,” she says, because there are no longer rules beyond the ones she should be creating for herself. And she doesn’t doubt for a second that Hannibal has brought one.

A very big part of her enjoys the way Krendler’s eyes widen, how he starts gibbering.

“Starling. Clarice! Listen, I...”

Damnably, despicably, *weak* man. Breaking her life out of spite.

Hannibal takes the coupe from her hand and slides the knife into it instead, softly, tenderly. Then he moves around until he’s behind Krendler, but still within striking distance because *such* is his arrogance.

“...can work something out, Starling, please, I...”

She feels with a finger along the blade, and recognises it by shape. The linoleum knife with which Hannibal killed Abigail, gutted Will and gave her her own abdominal stigmata. Wounds to match those of Will’s sacrifice.

“I would appreciate it if you avoid the heart,” says Hannibal politely.

“...Clarice! Clarice please I promise I...”

Her lip curls at the thought of putting any part of Paul Krendler in her mouth, least of all his putrid heart. Even with Hannibal’s superior culinary skills at her service she cannot see how it would be palatable.

“...God dear God please please please...”

She’s got an excellent grasp of anatomy. She’s taken classes, she’s participated in more autopsies than she cares to remember.

Ensuring absolute eye contact with Hannibal she aims straight for the heart.

The blade goes in easy. Like cutting into butter, she thinks. No wonder Hannibal favours this as a tool; it really is quite superb.

She lets it stay in for a while. She lets go of it and watches how it moves with the rhythm of Krendler’s heart. He is completely silent, even though he is still conscious. He is just looking at her, fat lips open, eyes wide. How peculiar.

She pulls the knife out, and the blood comes with it. Just enormous amounts of it, and in a counterintuitive way the heart speeds up and pumps it out faster and faster, just *gushing*, staining all of Krendler's front red. Soaking him.

She's not done.

She raises the knife and slashes into his heart again. And again. She stabs and stabs and stabs, until there is only a bloody mess left of Paul Krendler's heart. Nothing for Hannibal to play with.

She stops. Backs away a couple of steps. Her socks are saturated. Her hold on the linoleum knife is hard, and she realises with faint surprise that she is crying.

She looks around her. Swipes a hand through the salt and the iron on her face.

She has made a mess. Hannibal will be cross with her for what she has done to his pantry. So much blood. Spatter. Pools. She could fingerpaint with it. She could create glorious watercolours. Sunsets perhaps. Or red cottages in red woods. Autumn trees.

She had always wanted to take up painting.

She breathes through her sobs. Whistling breaths in a drumming staccato.

Hannibal comes up behind her again. He puts his hands on her shoulders and rests his chin on her crown. His front moulded to her back. His blood rushing in time with hers. Black as pitch.

She closes her eyes and breathes deeply, pulls the tang of blood and fear and night into her nostrils.

Then she spins around within Hannibal's embrace, faster than even he appears to fathom, and she presses the bloodied knife to his throat.

Hannibal stands entirely still. His eyes are blown wide open, eclipses trying to swallow her whole. His nostrils flare, and by his side, his hands twitch.

She sees Will standing behind him, off to the side. His arms are crossed over his chest, and he looks relaxed, curious. Intrigued with this latest development, making no move to stop her.

He's been quiet this entire time. Unobtrusive. Participating by being present.

He knows he doesn't need to take up space right now.

She presses down on the blade, and the faintest trickle of blood goes pouring down Hannibal's strong throat. His deep swallow redirects the trickle down his collarbone, and she can feel him, large and heavy and hot, *pulsing*, against her stomach.

"I did it because I wanted to," she says, voice low, each word as sharp and as clear as how stars stab into the tapestry of the night sky. "Not because you manipulated me into doing it."

Over Hannibal's shoulder she meets Will's eyes. They know. They both *know*.

Will nods at her. He smiles a little, damn him. She feels warm and heavy and loose. She feels wholly his.

She looks back up at Hannibal. Raises a brow, presses the linoleum knife deeper into him. More blood. Some of it has pooled into the hollow of his throat.

Wishing pool. Scrying pool.

She leans forward a little and delicately dips the tip of her tongue into it. Warmth and iron and the delicious, intoxicating hellfire that is Hannibal. She groans, despite herself, an animal sound. Lowers the knife. Hannibal's strong hands encircle her wrists, but he doesn't try and take the sharp blade from her.

She knows, even now, that he could kill her precisely whenever he wants.

"How fantastic," he says and kisses his blood from her lips. "Dinner at eight!"

skin on skin

Chapter Notes

Ok. I lied. There will be one more chapter after this. Different reasons, hey ho.

Typhoid and Swans

chapter 19: skin on skin

She drops the knife onto the floor, and thinks that it makes a dreadful racket, even though it probably doesn't. All the blood down there must muffle the sound of metal against tile somewhat, but she can't tell, because her ears are ringing.

She shakes her head, and attempts to wipe at her tears, but succeeds only in smearing blood all over her face.

Hannibal carefully puts his hand on her shoulder.

"Mr Krendler tried with all his might to bring you down, Clarice. He wanted to make you detest yourself, so that he may win. Do not allow him a victory from beyond the grave."

"Save it, please," she murmurs. "I'm not sorry."

She takes a step back even though it makes her miss the warmth of Hannibal. She's not just saying it, she realises; she is truly not sorry. Not for this. She looks down on Krendler's body. He looks dumb in death; mouth hanging open, eyes wide and a hole where his heart ought to be.

"I could really do with a shower," she says.

She looks to Will, her saviour and her doom, beseeching him to help. To remove her.

He understands, of course, and steps up. Takes her hand.

"Come with me," he says, voice pitched low and dark.

Hannibal nods.

"Of course, Clarice. You will feel so much better once you've freshened up." He toes Krendler's chair clear of the growing pool of blood, and he looks positively delighted. "I will begin preparing dinner."

Will leads her out from the pantry, through the kitchen and dining room, and out into the large hallway. But where she would have expected him to head for the stairs, and the upper floors, he instead urges her to the right.

“Hannibal has a very large tub in his suite,” he says, sensing her silent question.

When her steps slow at this, he moves her along with his hand on her lower back, gentle enough but she can feel his fingers curl over her spine, blunt nails making little indents in her skin even through her clothing. His demeanour in the pantry had been one of studious, casual interest, but now he is tense, she can feel it; there is a humming, thrumming aura clinging to him, opaque and tactile. Quite unlike anything she’s ever felt from him before. Wild. That’s what it is. It’s wildness and something like savagery.

She doesn’t ask if Hannibal will object to her using his facilities. It seems a trifling concern, in the grand scheme of things. She simply heeds Will, and allows him to take her to the east wing. Into Hannibal’s large room, and the bathroom attached to it.

It is strangely restrained, she thinks as she looks around with vague interest. Sleek and tasteful with muted marble and careful lighting. Clearly very expensive, but nothing ostentatious about it all.

The tub though, as Will had promised, is almost grotesquely large, and sunken into the floor in front of yet another floor to ceiling window. There is a steep slope outside, and the forest hovers so impetuously close on this side of the house, that it seems that they are among the treetops. Green and white, and the leaden sky above. High up.

She clings to that; the illusion of freedom, the perception of weightless suspension.

Will runs the taps, and pours a healthy amount of bath oil from the Farmacia Santa Maria Novella into the whirling water. Soon the room smells of the forest outside: oak and moss and subtle herbal spice. Steam rises, fogs the edges of the many mirrors and the window, turning this space into a contained little world, removed and maybe-safe.

She stays where Will left her, right inside the door. She’s wringing her hands, she suddenly realises, and she doesn’t know why. That is the worst of it. Is her body wanting to repent for something her mind has already categorised as permissible? She looks at the blood on her hands, feels the stickiness of it on her face and throat, and she doesn't know.

Will knows.

“Undress,” he says, and she silently obeys, pulls off her soft lounge pants and her underwear and her sodden socks, her top and her bra. Stands naked wrapped in steam and the way he looks at her. He looks at her like she is worth something. Like she is a jewel, a treasure, a river in spring.

Like she is dappled sunlight hitting the water and catching on scales.

It makes her study herself in the long mirror running above the built-in sinks, trying to find what it is he sees. She has only recently been reacquainted with her image, and right now she

looks almost comical; the creamy white of her skin everywhere but her forearms, her face, her neck and collarbones.

Like a murderer's version of a farmer tan, she thinks with despairing gallows humour.

Will wraps his arms around her from behind, uncaring of the blood. In a sudden, startling flash, she remembers the first time he held her: in the cabin, the night she escaped. She had been stripped bare then as well, and now she knows that it was the moment he made her his. When they sat wrapped up in each other in front of a weak fire, when he forced her to feel safe with him, when he forced her to bleed into him. That is when he won. She just didn't quite acknowledge it back then. Didn't *know*.

She tilts her head back, rests it on his shoulder. Feel his pulse against her cheek. Feels like she's melting just enough to merge. She can almost see it happening, like the glass warps a little from heat.

Will turns his head and kisses her, and the slow way his hands slide from her waist down to her hips is unmistakable.

"But I..." she gestures down at herself, painted red with coldblooded murder.

"Yes."

Gently he makes her lean forward, brace herself with her hands against the sink. He gathers her hair in one hand and frees himself from his jeans with the other. He doesn't prepare her for him, and she doesn't seem to need it. Her having difficulties receiving him does not occur to either of them.

"You were beautiful. You were perfect," he tells her as he comes inside her, does something fast and sharp with his hips to make hers impact with the cold ceramic of the sink. His voice is soft but his actions almost brute; she will bruise, she thinks, she will feel him for a long time after this.

Even so, he strokes her softly between her shoulder blades and murmurs praise as he sets his pace; unearthed subliminal movements, and such sweet words sticking to the sharpness of his Cupid's bow before falling down into her hair. He holds her hard so he won't jolt her too far outside of herself, even though she thinks it doesn't really help.

And she hangs tight and takes him, allows him to fuck her just the way he needs to. Because it's *Will*, and he thinks she is beautiful and perfect, and he has won fair and square.

He mouths at the livid bite on her throat; the mark she requested from Hannibal. He kisses the corner of her mouth, his front heavy on her back. Dig his hands into her hair and use it as leverage for his push and pull.

And she is lost and found again, then lost, then...

She had thought this would be just for him, but she realises that she is slipping and sliding in and out of herself just the way he is. That her breaths are stuttering, that she is moaning with

white knuckles, back arched to take him even further. There is pressure from within and pressure all around her and she is crying, she realises, she is crying and begging him for more. She smiles when he gives it to her.

And then, a moment of excruciating clarity:

Eyes meeting in the foggy glass and her wondering at all the hues carelessly, haphazardly blended into his irises. Then she thinks she knows. *Blue hour*, that's what it is. The very same colour as the precipice between day and night, when dusk emerges victorious. And for a second, just a second, he slips and she sees *him*. Will Graham, the way he truly, really is now. An unapologetic chasm, so dark, so vivid. Bold brush strokes and certainty and deathly sharp blades.

But he's so *tender*, that's the devil of it. How can a man with eyes burning so blue fuck her like she's precious?

He finishes with a grunt and closed eyes, shutting her out, and she thinks that she can't allow that again, can't allow him to not let her see. She must have that from him, must know, no *games*; she will take a hammer to his facade.

It is only fair, when he won her before she even knew.

Then she is trying to breathe through the comedown, while behind her Will shucks off his clothes, then picks her up in his arms. He walks them down the steps into the bath, sinks them both into the warm water. She sits on his lap, with her face pressed into his throat, mouthing at the rise and falls of his breaths, and around them the water turns red.

It doesn't matter, she thinks. It doesn't matter when she is enveloped by wet warm softness and the hardness of him.

And Will holds her, and he doesn't tell her that he is proud of her, but she can feel it all the same.

She falls asleep, or at least she's drifting, and she comes back to awareness to the sound of Hannibal's voice.

There is no confusion, no disorientation. She places herself immediately. Knows where she is, who she is. What she has done.

She is still in Will's lap, face to chest, and the water is lukewarm and pink. She shivers a little and presses closer to Will, but she doesn't feel embarrassed or naked as she turns her head to look for Hannibal.

He is sitting crouched on the floor at the very edge of the tub. At first glance his stance could be mistaken for something like relaxed, but she knows him better now and he is anything but. Rapt and treacherous, every line of him writ in acute attention and focus, nostrils flared, eyes sharp.

“Clarice,” he says when he sees he’s got her attention. “I hope you feel a bit better now.”

“I do,” she answers and feels how she rises and falls with Will’s breaths. “Is it time for dinner already?”

She looks out the window, but it’s not yet quite dark; it is that queer Arctic almost-light slinking between the trees, making it tricky to land on the correct part of the day.

“Not quite yet.” His eyes rove unapologetically over her skin, even though he has seen her in a state of undress before. Her back, her flanks...there is such a lot of it on display, she thinks, and she cannot find it within herself to feel uncomfortable. Not anymore. Not with these two men; they have already seen so much more of her than her naked skin.

“I brought you something.” With his head he indicates behind him, the wall by the door. On a hook there hangs a dress bag similar to the one Will brought her the first time she shared a table with them both. “For tonight.”

Then he reaches into the tub, past Will, and cups her damp cheek.

“A special dress for a special dinner. You don’t have to, but I should like it very much if you chose to wear it.”

She nods into the baptismal bowl of his hand, and luxuriates in this illusion of choice.

“Yes, of course.”

Underneath her Will appears entirely relaxed, his arms comfortably around her, his neck resting on the edge of the bath. His hair is curling wildly from the damp, and she would like to bite or lick or suck or chew the taut, tender column of his throat. But Hannibal’s hand travels from her cheek to the side of her neck and to the top of her shoulder, his fingernails gently scraping their way along the road of damp skin and delicate bone, all the way off the sloping cliff that is her acromion.

She arches slightly, can feel her nipples harden against Will, thighs tightening around his hips, and goosebumps that speak nothing of the rapidly chilling water. Her breaths puff short and sharp, and Will’s attention is rapt under half closed lids. His mouth curls *just* so, and she knows precisely how fucked she is.

She is left alone in Hannibal’s bathroom. First Hannibal returns to the kitchen, then Will to his own room to freshen up and get changed for dinner.

She leaves the cooling bath water, and steps into Hannibal’s shower. Allows the warm water to fall down over her with heavy density, anchors herself to the slippery Italian marble. Carefully chooses from the array of exclusive soaps and oils and shampoos on offer, turns herself into a jarring and sumptuous olfactory blend following only hazy instinct. Soil and moss and violet. Herbs and pine tar and smoke.

Then, clean and warm and flushing, she goes to slip on Hannibal's offering.

In its cut, this dress is as severe as the last. A floor length column with sleeves to her elbows. Its only nod to whimsy is its asymmetric neckline, some clever yet austere draping leaving one shoulder delicately bared.

The colour though, the colour is something else.

Tawny amber, shifting into copper and whisky, veering off into umber and mahogany. Then back again with her movements, shifting like an oil spill.

She thinks of the tiger's eye encased in gold that she had worn for that first dinner. The colour of this dress is that of tiger's eye translated into silk.

How very *Hannibal* to bookend things like this.

No shoes, but she doesn't need them. Not with this dress. She likes how the silk whispers and sighs across her bare feet. She looks again in the dress bag, but there is no jewellery either. Silently she agrees with Hannibal's taste: this dress needs no adornments.

She does nothing to her hair other than drying it and then brushing it until it falls smooth and shiny down her back. She pinches her cheeks and looks at herself in the mirror, clean now of steam and the fog of wanton breaths. The colour of the dress against the coolness of her skin and the warmth of her hair. Hannibal had been quite right: this hue truly does flatter her, even more so than green.

Last thing she dabs some of Hannibal's cologne - tobacco, wood, amber, bergamot - on the inside of her wrists, behind her ears. Then she takes a deep breath, and heads for the dining room.

Senses as acute as always, Hannibal intercepts her in the hallway. He is wearing a black suit of what looks like silk and cashmere, a starched white shirt and a tie that unapologetically is made of the same material as her dress. And he takes her in - the gown, the hair - and his nostrils flare when she gets close enough for him to scent.

"Exquisite," he murmurs, eyes brimming with flames and avarice as he hands her a cold crystal tumbler. "I have a few finishing touches to make before we can eat. Why don't you take an aperitif in here?"

A hand very low on her back, long fingers curling around her hip and warming the silk, as he gently ushers her forward. Leads her to the door of the drawing room, and with a sweeping gesture with his free hand bids her to enter.

"Dinner will be just a moment," he murmurs, then disappears through the door to the kitchen. It swings shut behind him, and she is left alone.

She moves restlessly around the large space, the bronze silk murmuring against her skin. She doesn't like this room, even though at the moment it is warmly lit by candles and sconces. Too many memories of excavations, of fighting. First, to hold her own, then, to play by their

rules to create the space to exist as herself. She feels uneasy in here, fretful and wrought. The dining room she has learnt to abide, despite having been the subject of one of Hannibal's admonishments in there, but this room... no.

She comes to rest by the window. Night has fallen now, and it's void of moon and stars. Even with the snow she struggles to make out shapes, can't tell where the treetops end and the sky begins. Even so, she knows the stag is out there, moving on the periphery of the frigid woods, leaving no tracks in the snow.

Watching her. Watching her and dooming her and saving her.

There are frost blossoms on the glass and she is tired of winter now. It is beautiful, the winter here, a lethal magnificent beast, but...

She would very much like to see this place in summer, she realises. Will's river, gleaming and whispering and heavy with fish. The meadows, the flowers. The warm smells of the forest where Mischa's spectre lives. She would like to see it very much.

She takes a small sip of the drink - a Lillet with orange - and then looks at her hand holding the glass. Wonders if she will see blood that isn't there. Will she become wretched and mad?

But no, she decides. The blood was cleansed by Will. She won't see it again.

It won't bother her.

Lips on her naked shoulder, and for a second she cannot guess to whom they might belong, until she thinks to look in the glass in front of her.

Will, looking back at her through the frost blooms.

The neatest she's seen him. Crisp black shirt, opened at the collar. Black slacks, shined shoes. Hair swept back and his scars shiny and pink.

Dressed as befitting a celebration.

She turns to face him. He too is holding a glass. He must have been to see Hannibal before finding her.

"So," she says.

"Here we are," says Will.

"Do you feel victorious?" she asks, and raises her glass at him. "Because you should. You have played like God would play, and you have won."

"God?" he says, and he is fucking *smiling* over the rim of his own glass, she could swear it. "How do you mean?"

She shakes her head.

“You took me, and you made my world minuscule. Just so tiny. Then slowly, slowly, you both permitted my world to grow again. And you have placed yourselves as deities in the middle of it. The black holes at the centre of your very own galaxy, and I...” She cuts herself off, takes another small sip of her Lillet. “You bid me to kill, and I did. Are you, then, not gods?”

“I think you too have played very well, Clarice,” says Will and strokes two fingers along her cheekbone. “To stand here shimmering and beautiful, *alive* and adored. And I...” He shakes his head. “I do not think so much of God, and would not compare myself.”

“I think Hannibal sees a rival in God,” she says, and moves from between Will and the window. Feels breathless and sad and elated. Expectant. Goosebumps and premonitions. “Do you?”

“I love Hannibal,” says Will in a way so heavy that she thinks the words might be entirely new to the air, never before spoken out loud. His eyes are wide with the significance of it, his tongue wetting his lips as he continues: “But I am not quite like him. I am me. And you are you.”

He misunderstood her question or maybe he didn’t, and he takes hold of her hand, raises it to his lips and kisses her wrist. The way her heart beats against his mouth, ripe for the taking.

“It comes down to, as it does so often, that light cannot exist without the dark,” he continues slowly. “You see. Typhoid and swans, Clarice... it all comes from the same place. It’s so *slippery*, isn’t it?”

“Hannibal once accused me of wishing to light-paint with darkness,” she tells him, and it’s quite hard to breathe. Will smiles again.

“You will do it so *beautifully*, ” he tells her, and she believes him. She will.

“Dinner is served,” says Hannibal from behind them, making her jerk with how sudden she is taken from the moment.

Will nods at him, and offers her his arm. She places a hand at the crook of his elbow. Together they go to meet Hannibal, who smiles at them both with terrible affection.

The stage is set.

There is no going back.

endings, beginnings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Typhoid and Swans

Chapter 20: endings, beginnings

Hannibal has outdone himself.

The dining tableau is so beautifully preposterous, so studied, that she comes to a stop halfway across the room, just so that she may stare with no small amount of incredulity.

It is enormously, grotesquely over the top, yet somehow landing on the right side of tasteful.

How the fuck does he *do* that?

Flowers, flowers everywhere. Spilling out of antique vases on the table, on the sideboards, from sconces on the walls. Petals on the floor, already crushed under Hannibal's dress shoes. The colours are bright, vibrant, almost clashing with the interior; they are not his favoured palette.

Pinks, oranges, light blues.

Springlike, cheerful.

They seem chosen to convey a sense of optimism. Celebration.

In between all the flowers she sees several lit Ginori 1735 Ganymede candles; the eyes of the sculptures in which the candles burn all seem to be focused on her.

Bottles of vintage Chateau d'Yquem and Bâtard-Montrachet on ice. A bottle of 1929 Chateau Pétrus airing on one of the sideboards, next to a tumble of riotous snapdragons.

A green silk table cloth, crystal glasses, exquisite gold rimmed china. Aquazzura, Flora Danica, Lalique.

All items and objects on the alert lists with which she, just like Alana Bloom, had attempted to track down Hannibal. The sort of luxury fineries that she had guiltily studied in old fashion and lifestyle magazines back at the orphanage, where she had developed an *urge* for fine things; a keening somewhere deep inside her. A hunger.

Now she is surrounded with it, enveloped in it. Does it feel right? Is it *good* ? Can she choose this? Can she choose something else?

She doesn't want to know. No tonight.

And then, of course, there are the gilded cages, suspended over the table at different heights. Songbirds inside, exotic blots of colour and movement. She cannot imagine where he might have procured them, and how.

The air is filled with perfume, with song, with the dry soft sound of beating wings.

Will, by now apparently well used to Hannibal's tendency for the dramatics, has gone ahead and seated himself. He's shaking out his serviette when she feels Hannibal's hand splay low on her back. One finger swipes down the soft slope to her buttocks, and she shivers.

"This is quite somethin', huh?" she says, deliberately bringing out her West Virginian drawl, wanting, *needing*, the contrast against all this ostentatious, rich splendour.

Hannibal's mouth twitches, just slightly, but she can't tell whether in annoyance or amusement.

"Have a seat, Clarice."

She moves under Hannibal's touch, comes slowly over to the table.

But she doesn't immediately heed his suggestion to sit. She instead approaches the bird cage most easily within reach, and opens the little door. The bird - a shama - tweets and flutters in streaks of ochre, black and white, but it doesn't take her long to catch it in cupped hands.

She cradles it, as careful as she knows how, and brings it over to the window beyond the dining table. Opens it, from floor to ceiling, and invites a gush of frigid air into the room. She can feel a tiny heart beating against her palm, like a flurry of snow, and behind her Will and Hannibal say nothing at all as she opens her hands.

The bird sits still for one, two, three heartbeats, then it takes flight. It streaks out into the dark and disappears in a sharp second, no more colours no more songs.

Will it die out there, in the cold, in a hostile environment so far removed from its natural one?

Most probably.

"No starlings?" she asks over her shoulder, still looking out in the dark after the bird. "They are great mimics."

"A bit too on the nose, don't you think?"

It's Hannibal that answers, but she can hear Will's wry chuckle. When she turns back towards the table she sees that he has poured himself a glass of Château Pétrus, and is sipping on it like it isn't from a bottle worth about 900 dollars.

He certainly seems to have taken to this life with something like ease.

That's when I stopped fighting it. That's when I decided to stay with him.

Or, perhaps not. But it seems that what was done to him, he has done to her in return.

Hannibal is waiting for her over by her seat, and he says nothing about the bird. He pulls the chair out for her and she sits. Squirms a little on the seat as she wonders if what remains of Will deep inside her will leak out and stain the pretty silk of her dress.

Now when she is seated, she sees that platters of food are nestled in among all the flowers. Small, pretty morsels, rich in texture and colour. Beautifully, artfully presented, of course, a true feast for the eyes.

Evidently it's Hannibal's version of a buffet. Finger food, a smörgåsbord. And, she believes, an effort to spare her sensibilities. The food before her is stunning, but most of it too elaborate for its ingredients to be reliably identified.

Tonight's meal will not be a heavy one, then.

She notes her own goosebumps with something like distance.

Hannibal sits, and shakes out his serviette. Pulls a bottle of Chateau d'Yquem from its silver ice bucket, and moves her glass slightly closer to him.

"This bottle," he says as he begins to pour the wine, coppery caramel in colour, into her glass, "is a vintage from the year you were born. I thought it exceedingly suitable for this evening."

He pours himself a glass too, then replaces the bottle. Strong, slender fingers around the crystal stem, and he proffers his glass to her in salute.

"Clarice."

She raises her own glass, and for a second considers the way candle flames and bird wings reflect and move on the surface of the deep liquid. Then she inclines her head at Hannibal, then Will, and takes a delicate sip.

Gorgeous, of course. Completely fantastic, even she can tell. And above her the birds tweet and chirp.

"The colour of it reminds me of your hair," says Hannibal, takes another mouthful, then puts his glass down and reaches for a platter of oysters. He carefully picks one up, and spoon some vinaigrette on top. He looks at her, and she knows that his eyes are like this for a *reason*.

"You've killed a bad man, Clarice. Would you kill more?"

She starts at this new version of *bon appetit*.

“You act like I am a virgin killer,” she stalls. “I am not. I’ve killed, before I killed Paul Krendler.”

“I am not talking about self defence in the line of duty, or *necessity*. I am talking about cold blood.”

Then he leans forward, and gently puts the tip of the shell to her lower lip. “Open up, Clarice.”

And she remembers what Will had told her once. That time he had returned from willful, deliberate murder, and he had shown her rare vulnerability and openness, and he had meant every word. She remembers.

She tips her head back to let the oyster, briney and sweet, slide down her throat.

“I don’t know,” she says once she has swallowed it down.

“I think you do.”

“Only if it’s right,” she says, and she can see, she can see how they both know it is her answer. She thinks about the passage of time. She truly doesn’t know how long it has taken for her to become what she is now, *here* .

Clarice Starling: no longer an FBI agent.

Something else.

Something of malleable matter, surrounding a strong shiny gem; high up on Moh’s scale.

Hannibal smiles, wide and toothy.

“You look so pleased,” she tells him. “But you have lost a little too, you know. Keeping me like this, the way I am, like *myself*... it will leave no room for your sister.”

It’s funny, she thinks as she watches how the bullet hits, that she has always treated Hannibal with frightened insouciance while dancing so carefully around Will.

Will, who now leans back in his chair, looking amused and intent, one hand propping up his chin, the other turning his wine glass around and around. He says nothing, his eyes follow everything, and she wonders if he will save her if she steps too far out of line.

Hannibal, who in the meantime has picked up his own oyster. Slides it into his mouth, swallows, and dabs his mouth delicately with the serviette before answering.

“There are other ways to find a place for Mischa in this world, Clarice.”

No helpful emphasis or pause to truly make his point, but then she doesn’t need it. She takes a sip of wine and wonders why she insists on playing when he will never let her win.

Maybe because it's a rush. An impossible mix of adrenaline and endorphins, fear and delight. How can she wean herself off of this?

She feels so *alive*.

She sighs. She chooses a small, delicate thing from a Lalique Bulbes No 2 platter. Meat cut so thin she can see the night clean through it, folded into the shape of rose, something glutinous in the middle of it glimmering like dew.

"In your professional opinion," she says and studies the rose. " - am I crazy?"

"I believe you are quite sane, Clarice."

"Oh really," she says and then pops the small morsel of what must surely be Paul Krendler into her mouth. "I know what I am doing, but I am still doing it." She chews, swallows. "Surely that must be insanity?"

"Carpaccio of sweetbreads with bone marrow," says Hannibal helpfully but there is the slightest edge to his voice. It occurs to her that she may have disrupted some careful choreography of his, thrown a performance into disorder by simply helping herself.

Time for a change of subject.

"Where would you like to go when you are done with this house, with Canada and the cold?" And, because she can't help herself: "Florence, perhaps?"

Hannibal doesn't rise to it.

"I would dearly love to, but it's not feasible at this moment in time. There are so many things there that I would like to show you, outside of what you have already discovered yourself. So much beauty." He leans close, and his nose and lips trail with infinite delicacy down the slope of her throat. "I would take you to the *Farmacia Santa Maria Novella*. There, we would get you your very own scent." A deep inhale, and goosebumps travelling along with him. "Though you already smell divine. Such complexity, such...readiness."

Her sharp breath cuts through even the chatter of the birds. Hannibal leans back again.

"One day, no doubt." Wistfulness is a peculiar thing to see on his face, but it is doubtlessly there, nestling into every line. "In Florence, I feel like God could be close."

She wants to claw back some equilibrium. It makes her too sharp, too sloppy.

"Ah. What a coincidence. In the drawing room just now, Will and I spoke of God."

Just a raised brow, and her hurtling ahead because why not?

(she knows why not. she does it anyway)

"You compete with God, don't you? A sort of petty dick measuring contest. You want to be better than him, I think. Meaner. More wilful."

“Enough, Clarice,” says Will, and she listens immediately and feels suitably chastened to boot. Hannibal only looks at her, eyes far too difficult to read, a slight tick at the corner of his mouth betraying annoyance.

“I am very sorry, Hannibal,” she says and puts a hand on top of his, and she is sincere, she is absolutely sincere.

So she endeavours to become more couth. She smiles. She laughs. She is scintillating. She plays her part beautifully lit by candle flames, and so do the men. They eat and they drink and they listen to the birds sing. The stag is outside but she doesn't mention it.

Only over dessert does she break character, the tension perhaps getting to her. Things are becoming ever more on the cusp of inevitable, and it's getting to be difficult to breathe right. She feels beautiful, she feels scared.

“What is to say I won't go the way of Abigail? What is to say, in a quarrel between the two of you, that I don't become the *punishment*? Like Abigail?”

The question doesn't suit anywhere in among what is happening, she is asking entirely without context, but they will understand. Of course they will.

She looks at them, the two men that have made themselves her entire universe - Hannibal clearing plates and Will over by the windows watching the night - and she wonders why they are still playing at being delicate, why they are still dancing around what is to happen. It feels itchy, this drawn-out thing, too kinetic, like she wants to be expanding outwards but is being brutally contained by her own skin.

Will looks at her, and he smiles, and he understands, but he doesn't answer her question and neither does Hannibal.

“A nightcap, Clarice?”

“Yes please,” she says.

To her faint surprise Will takes her to the cosy nook, the one where they first fucked.

She would have thought somewhere with more inherent *drama* would have been chosen, but she is grateful nonetheless. She likes this room.

She declines his offer of a bourbon, chooses instead a club soda, even though she is feeling damnably sober. Her instincts tell her that she should be clear-headed for what is about to take place, that nothing must be lost to fog and vague memories.

She sits down on the Chesterfield, and she manages not to blush at the thought of what happened on the upholstered leather the last time she spent time in this room. It wasn't even that long ago, was it, but it feels like things that could comfortably fit into a lifetime have happened since. They have made her become something else, and still she doesn't know how

much was forced and manipulated, and how much was already *her*, but dormant. She doesn't quite know how long it took them; she suspects not long enough.

It's quiet. The room is so quiet. Too quiet. She knows of course what is about to happen, knows where they are headed, that it is inevitable. So why is it so quiet? Just the muffled sound of Will's shoes against the carpet, the muted clinking of glasses, the pouring of liquid. It should be loud, this monumental thing waiting to pounce. It should be thunderous.

But it isn't. The air is shivering and heavy but there is no thunder.

Will walks over and hands her her drink, and she sits there with her neck tipped back and the cool glass in a loose-wristed grip, and she looks up at him.

He doesn't sit. He stays standing, his knees almost touching hers. He's silent. He drinks slowly from his bourbon. His eyes are so dark with the dusk of the room that they appear quite bottomless, pools of black water and secrets in undulant, coy choreography.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, she spreads her legs as best as she is able in the dress and allows him to come between them. He heeds her invite. Their position becomes unmistakable and carnal, and as she puts her glass down and places both hands on his hips, she thinks that she would like to see him unmade.

There is great power in unmaking. She ought to know.

She really really ought to know.

She ponders that as she pulls down the zip of his slacks. As she tries to sink into the room, read its clues and secrets. Is it movement that causes the candle flames to stir and sigh, or a draft? Are the shadows true and empty? Are there soft breaths floating on the tenuous atmosphere, and if so, are they of man or beast?

She pulls him out with a gentle hand, and thinks of crowns of bone and velvet. Hardness wrapped in softness and warmth. Rutting stags and dripping blood onto snow, steam billowing from nostrils. Feels his heartbeat here, a staggering pulse against the palm of her hand. Leans forward, just a little, so she can feel it on her tongue too.

It is scrumptious.

And so she makes good on her tease from that first night in here: she takes him as deep as she can. So deep as to choke on him, but that is what she wants, isn't it? Just *gorge* on Will Graham. And when she sees how he fights to hold himself back, how he struggles to not just ram himself down her throat and take and *take*, then she feels warm with pleasure. With achievement. With being good.

With holding him with her mouth.

She hums against skin that is alive and she tries to suck all his secrets out of him, so intent that she doesn't even care that he rips the beautiful silk of her dress, tears her neckline down so that her left breast falls out, high and peaky. He grasps the soft flesh in a callused hand,

plays with her nipple a little too roughly as she enjoys the way he forces his hips to stay absolutely still. The effort of it. The strain. How he fights against his instincts.

Delicious.

And she hollows her cheeks and she drools and she hums, tries to swallow him whole, damn him, fuck him, look what he has *done* to her. He *deserves* to be unmade and taken inside her, she wants him forever, it is only *right*.

And oh she can feel how he tightens. See the victory war with the helplessness in his eyes when there is no going back, when it's too late, when he can only do what she demands of him.

And she changes her mind. Perhaps she can't handle fragments of Will Graham in her belly. At least not yet. Not nestling along with Paul Krendler.

"On me," she says, releasing him with a pop, letting her hand take over, slipping and sliding over the hard heat of him, carrying him the last starved distance. "All over me."

And he surrenders on her chest just like that. Soft little noises from his mouth, hands clenched by his side as he stains the silk, stains her. His head is thrown back and from her position below she thinks him beautiful and vulnerable in the most savage of ways.

Silence, after. Barely their breaths resting heavy on the air. Will's head cocked, aware.

There is some peace, languid and silken and anticipatory, as she reclines back once more. She smells of Will, is covered in Will, and she wants to rub herself like a cat against the primal, grotesque pleasure of it.

But Hannibal is suddenly there.

She had known he was already in the room, of course, but now he emerges into illumination, making himself real, and not some shadowy beast watching her attempt to bring Will Graham to his knees.

And it would appear that he is no longer content just watching. He comes forward, all the way up to them, undone collar and unkempt hair. Will moves aside for him, calm, casual, watchful. And Hannibal's eyes, she thinks as she lazily looks up at him, they are starved.

Hannibal Lecter does not starve.

Hannibal Lecter is a *glutton*.

He takes her in, frightfully intent, but he doesn't meet her eyes. His entire focus falls below her face.

She follows his gaze, and she understands.

A drop of Will hangs suspended from her left nipple. It shines like a pearl in the soft candlelight. It moves gently in pace with her heartbeats, shivering, breathless.

And Hannibal falls to his knees in front of her, graceful and formidable even in such supposedly reverent stance, and he doesn't hesitate. He doesn't ask.

The time for asking is past gone. She knows it as well as he, as well as Will.

Hannibal leans forward, strong arms hemming her, and his lips envelope her nipple. She can feel his strong tongue swipe at the luminous droplet, see the muscles in his throat work. Then he starts to suckle, and her hips jerk against him, her fingers dig into the leather of the couch.

One hand on her waist, another on her breast as he sucks her nipple into sharpness. Teeth and tongue, quite merciless, and she can't breathe. Her hands find his hair, pulls, and through half closed eyes there is Will, his regard beautiful in its keenness.

Hannibal releases her nipple with a final indent of canines, then tugs her downwards, halfway off the couch, so that her thighs envelope one of his, and he manipulates her *just so* along his quad. Any purchase she might have had is falling away, crumbling, and when he bites her in the exact place where he bit her before, then her entire being stutters and stills, before whooshing alive again. Blood rushing for him, for them both.

"Is there more?" he murmurs against the soft hardness of her clavicle, "Is there more for me?"

And he backs off a little, sinks to his haunches in between her legs, his hands warm through the silk bunched on her thighs, and she understands precisely what he means. When Will had taken her in the bathroom earlier, bloodthirsty and wanton. How much of himself did he leave behind?

She considers as he bunches the skirt of her dress ever higher, as he slides his surprisingly calloused fingertips along the softness of her inner thighs. Journeys around and up, to the waistband of her underwear. Begins to pull them down her legs, keeping her fixed all the while. His hair falling into his eyes, obscuring them, and still they are too much. Too violent, too hot, too *other*.

He throws her underwear into the shadows beyond the couch, then leans into her.

She hadn't dared to allow Will this, fearing her own vulnerability and his sharp canines. Hannibal is more dangerous, more liable to *slip*. Even so she slides her fingers into his hair as he lowers his head, guides him home, a small little noise escaping her as he finds her with his tongue.

Because she must let it go. If this is to work, then she mustn't be afraid to allow him close, even if this is *too* close.

And he knows what he's doing.

Tongue strong and hard, immediately deep inside her. One hand on her stomach, another on her hip, holding her still when all she wants is to levitate. Float up and then be tugged through the air with the sensations he is making her feel.

It's inhumane, the intense pleasure and the danger. It's a cruelty she knows Hannibal must enjoy immensely.

And it is different, she thinks as she gives in to it. As she puts her legs up on his shoulders, creates a screened-off privacy as false as it is comforting. As she leans back and looks up at the ceiling, at the shadows thrown by the fire, and allows herself to be kept still to suffer impossible sensations.

It's different because of the freedom in knowing that Hannibal might well kill her, might even kill Will, should he deem it necessary. There is a strange sort of abandonment in knowing that. A fey security. He would kill her from a place of regard and respect, if not regret, but he would still do it. Right now, though, he is deep inside, licking and lapping and sucking any remnants of Will Graham out of her and into himself.

And he is not using teeth.

It will have to do.

And then Will is back with her. He has removed his shirt, she sees, and his slacks still hang open, low on his hips. He sits next to her on the couch, puts his arms around her, and he kisses her. It's a lot, that kiss, teeth and tongue, and the way she lets him inside her mouth is almost alien to her. Like she's too generous with herself and it's too dangerous, even though she can clearly see there is no other way to be. Not here.

Not with them.

It's too much. Too much, having them both inside her like this, at the same time. Too intimate and too exposed and she, she can't, she will...

She will die a little.

Her own unmaking, then, comes with a strange quiet as she free-falls into tangles of thorns and tines. Sees red eyes watching her, hears whispers and laughs, feels the sensations and caresses of secrets as she falls outside of herself, just like that. It might have been frightening, this eviction from her own flesh, but the pleasure is so strong as to take the edge of the terror.

She tries to gather herself back together, tears in her eyes, but she knows they are not nearly done. She knows it. Can see it in the way Hannibal licks his lips as he rests his head on her belly, can feel it in the way Will is stroking two gentle fingers up and down her flank. A brief pause, a slowing of breaths before...

When she turns her head, just slightly, Will is right there, looking so soft and dark, eyes wide with something she can't describe, can't assign a name or a colour or a feeling. It's too enormous to fathom, the way he looks at her, how pleased he is, how perpetually unbeaten.

Out of the three of them, she suspects that Will Graham has somehow won the most.

"Did you have to speak about this?" she wonders, voice thick, breathing short and sharp.
"Did you plan this to your satisfaction?"

“Rarely do Will and I have to talk in order to manage events the way we wish,” answers Hannibal.

His voice is rough as granite, pitch and low, and she knows that he will want so much *more* now. He will want *everything*.

He proves her right when he simply lifts her from the sofa and carries her like she is of no more substance than atoms and molecules held together only by warring want and fight-or-flight. She had always known of his strength, of course, but even so she is struck with the ease he handles her.

No one could ever win against Hannibal, she thinks. No one, except perhaps Will.

And with both of them together...

Hannibal puts her down by the fire, just as Will did a couple of days gone. The choice seems like something deliberate. He places her on her stomach, goes down onto his knees, and without any ado or warning grabs her dress at the back and tears it in two. Delicately, with a softness begetting the brutality with which he committed the sundering, he spreads the pieces to reveal her naked backside.

Goosebumps, even though the room is warm. Firing instincts. The soft light and the darkness. The smells of musk and woods, ink and blood, by now something familiar. The remains of the dress becomes a silken blanket beneath her, and she stretches and arches, arms out in front of her, legs taut.

Will is something hazy in her periphery; right now, this is about Hannibal.

He has, after all, patiently waited while Will has made his plays. He has shown great restraint; now he wants his fill. It is only fair, then, that her attention is wholly on him.

He unbuttons his waistcoat one-handed, the other hand busy gathering her hair over her shoulder, giving himself an uninterrupted line of neck flowing into back flowing softly into hips and buttocks.

He bends over her, and drags his lips gently down the bumps of her spine, following with featherlight fingertips along her flanks. He breathes brimstone on her, and it tickles her ribs.

Just...tickles. Nothing more.

Well. She needs to make a decision.

She looks at Hannibal over her shoulder, and she knows her eyes are blown out and her lips swollen from Will's kisses. She knows she looks halfway deranged with lust and with trepidation, she knows that she looks like she is giving herself *away*.

For free.

She could just let it happen. She could flow with it, become soft and malleable between their lips and hands. Let them decide what direction they are all going in. It would be easy. She

could be an innocent, then.

But innocence is weakness. Only the guilty wield power.

Only the guilty may be truly *saved*.

Her voice is cut with too many emotions when she speaks.

“No.”

Agency. *Active participation*, Will had said.

Nothing else will do.

Hannibal stops touching her, but it costs him. His lips are pressed thin, his contours keening with need, but he listens. Another few seconds later, and he might not have. She can tell.

“No,” she says again. “You don’t have to do it like that. I don’t want you to be gentle. I want you to be you.”

There is a gale in his gaze as he considers this reference to their conversation in his bedroom. She had meant it, and she thinks that he can see it on her face, that she had meant it. The maroon in his irises becomes thin rings around growing blackness, and his bite mark on her throat throbs. His smile, when it comes, is terrible. She thinks of all the people whose very last sight in life was that smile, then she doubles down.

“Now kiss me again,” she says. “Kiss me like you did in the forest.”

He moves immediately, and even though she is *sure*, she still wonders if she can handle this. He falls on top of her, and he is so very heavy on her back. And he spares her nothing. Not with the way he uses her hair to pull her head around so that he may reach her lips with his. Not with the way he bites just as much as he kisses.

He presses her down into the floor, and he is so much bigger than her. He envelopes her, makes himself everything. Eats all her senses whole, becomes her sixth, lodged somewhere near her trachea. The immense weight of him becomes something otherworldly, like she is sinking through the floor and the ground beneath, far below the crust of the earth. Down into the darkness with him, where there is only Hannibal, and Hannibal’s lips and tongue and teeth. She strives to meet him, give to him as he gives to her with violence and intent, but here he will always win.

Doesn’t stop her trying.

Then the pressure eases and light enters into her world again. She feels herself being flipped; one smooth, effortless movement. Hannibal allows her up on her elbows as he stands, towering, and begins to undress.

He is a sight, she thinks, as more and more of his skin is revealed. Huge and sharp and strong, entirely unabashed in nudity. The way the shadows play on him is unnatural, she is sure, entirely independent of the light sources in the room.

Then he sinks onto his haunches, and he looks so like someone fallen. A being unfamiliar with regret, comfortable in his own skin of fanciful wickedness. She watches how he leans into himself, entirely at ease in his own existence. Untouchable, on fire. She could singe herself on him, she thinks. He could still burn her alive. Any moment, just one lapse, and she would be ashes.

“Clarice,” he says, and the way his hair is so dishevelled and the way his eyes are so wild knocks more things loose inside of her.

Her name is not an acknowledgement, she knows. It’s a question. One last chance before it’s too late.

“Yes,” she says.

Hannibal pulls her hips up onto his thighs, then spreads his so that she must spread hers. Her legs envelope his waist, muscles flexing against his skin, as she considers this position he has chosen for her; her lower body elevated, the rest of her reclined.

“*Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet*,” Hannibal murmurs.

Then he threads her onto his cock, pushes inside as deep as he can go. Hipbones jarring hipbones, an echo; acoustics trapped. She slides along the rug with his entry into her, blood rushing hard into her head.

“You are the honey in the lion.”

And he holds her hips so that she can’t move; she can only be taken. Can only vaguely consider the way she is becoming far too full, and far too lightheaded,

She had asked for this, and now she needs to receive it. Even so, the way he quickly forces her to orgasm is a cruelty. The helplessness of it, the titillation of an absence of choice. He holds her pleasure in a fist, and she must endure it even as all of her shiver and shake.

But, at least he slows down and allows her some breathing room. She is over sensitised and wrung inside out and all sensation sits on the surface of her skin, and the slow, almost thoughtful drag, the slip-slide, the in-out, becomes something almost hypnotic.

Then, she feels hands beneath her shoulders. She feels her upper body being lifted, and lowered again.

She understands. She knows. Her head and shoulders rest on Will Graham’s lap now, his wiry muscles stretching and straining beneath her.

The men are so close that their knees are touching, and she trapped between them.

Hannibal speeds up again, but Will helps her absorb the fierce push and pull of the movements. He is running his hands through her hair, over her face, travelling, *journeying* as restlessly as if her body is the sort of landscape that is just too wild and sensory to fathom; too much to stop and feel, the only option available to carry on into exhaustion.

She reaches behind herself, over her shoulders, body going taut and arched with the movement, and she clasps Will's thighs. Hard muscles beneath her palms, the position only reinforcing her vulnerability, the force behind Hannibal's movements.

And she looks up with that. Will and Hannibal are kissing in the air above her. Hannibal has one hand around her hip and the other on Will's chin. Will palms one of her breasts, the other is at the back of Hannibal's head.

And it all melds.

Hannibal fucking into her, Will making sure she's got nowhere to go. Will kissing her, then kissing Hannibal, and having her suck on his fingers. She loses track of hands, of trailing mouths, lips and teeth. Sweat and heat, the glide of supple, warm skin, the brush of bone against bone. The gentle lapping of marrow. Hannibal is ferocious and greedy where Will is firmly unconstrained in his need, and they both carve out their very own places within her. Three sets of heartbeats. If there are words then she can't understand them.

The stag is behind the sofa. She can see it looking at her, eyes wide and deep, its antlers growing terrible and sharp towards the ceiling. She reaches for it, her arm along the rug as she beckons, but it stays where it is, and she can't move. Impaled and crucified. Full.

Then Hannibal's movements become truly punishing, erratic, uncoordinated. Will is having to do some real work to keep her still for him. She can feel how he swells inside her, sees his eyes travel elsewhere, a strange, shimmering occurrence, a violent sort of transcendence. Then Will puts an arm over her chest, and Hannibal rears up, a beast from the Bible.

She refuses to let herself follow along. She wants to be lucid, she wants to *see*. Wants to experience him losing control and blow outward, even with the risk it carries. Eyes wide she watches his face as he spends deep inside her, and she could almost rejoice in how breathless he is, how far gone, how utterly, brilliantly lethal. Pulsing and snarling, depositing deep, deep inside.

It becomes a tangle, then. Heavy, too heavy, with her underneath it all. There is a deeply avaricious quality to it, how they hold her down with their own bodies, unwilling to allow her movement. They make lattices out of themselves, and still they seem to think that she will slip away through the smallest crack. Thighs and arms and torsos, and she doesn't know whose tongue is in her mouth, she doesn't know who is licking her clavicle, her collarbones, her belly, who is pushing Hannibal's spend back inside. She feels like a sacrifice, she feels like a price, and she cannot for the life of her work out who won.

But she feels sure her ribs are cracked open and both men have their hands on her beating heart.

Then she is gone.

It is almost a relief.

She wakes on the floor, and she is only vaguely surprised that she is still alive.

Is this what it will be like now, this perpetual wonderment? The constant balance?

Someone has draped her in a soft blanket, Hannibal's thighs under her hips have been replaced by a velvet throw cushion, and she is sore, bruised. But there is a languid, deeply sated feeling in stretching her limbs out, feeling every aching tendon and muscle.

She rolls over, looks around. She doubts they have gone far.

And indeed, Will is on the couch, wearing only his slacks. His eyes are dark as he considers her. Over by the fireplace stands Hannibal, still entirely naked, and resplendent in his otherness.

She tries to feel for the passage of time, can't. Maybe she never will be able to again.

"You won't try to leave any longer, will you?" asks Will with that peculiar mix of vulnerability and blood thirst that is so *beautifully* fashioned to snare.

She meets Hannibal's inscrutable eyes. She thinks that they are both careful not to touch her right now, as they hold the illusion of choice up to her the way they hold her bloody, burning heart: like a gleaming jewel.

This isn't her, this isn't who she is. And yet.

And *yet*.

At this moment, she's inhabiting her own skin with something that feels like grace.

"No," she agrees, perhaps too readily. "No, I will not."

Chapter End Notes

Time to close the door on our newly formed, fragile triumvirate, and hope they live happily ever after.

Also, that was my first time writing a threesome. Hope you're proud of me, mom!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!